

Title: Loving an enemy to death  
Text: Matthew 5.43-48  
Theme: The impossible demand  
Series: Matthew #26  
Prop Stmtnt You can only love your enemies, if your enmity against God is destroyed by grace.

Alistair Beach is a reporter who filed this report from a mosque in Cairo, Egypt earlier today. *“Hundreds of locals were crammed against the pointed steel gates of the mosque courtyard. Many were in no mood to forgive those trapped inside; in the minds of some Egyptians, the Morsi supporters have become little more than ‘terrorist’ outlaws....The fear and anxiety were palpable. Weeping relatives tramped around the prayer hall, while jumpy police officers toted their Kalishnikovs in one hand, wide-eyed and frantically chewing gum.”* He went on to describe how the shooting began, the panic, the chaos, the explosions, the violence, the blood and still more death. Egypt is fighting a war against itself. Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, are doing the same. How can this world ever get along when a nation can’t? How can a nation stay together when families don’t? The words of Christ are as astounding and as needful today as they were when he first uttered them 2,000 years ago. How can family be whole, when people are at war with God?

Read Text:

If Matthew chapter 5 was the only surviving record of the words and works of Christ, then he would go down in history as perhaps the greatest and most demanding ethics teacher who has ever lived. What Christ demands of us seems daunting. Then we look at it a little more closely and we think this isn’t just daunting, this is impossible. So, of course, we then look for some modification, some adjustment, some concession, some explanation that assures us that as long as we mean well, or don’t mess up as much as others, or find a way to make up for our failures that we will be okay. But, it isn’t there. And so, if we take these words seriously we begin to panic. What if Jesus really meant this? Did he really mean this? He couldn’t have really meant this? Could he? And then, one day I read the last verse. I was about 18 years old. *“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* And I remember feeling so condemned and so hopeless. I was not perfect. I had not been perfect. Far from it. And no matter how determined and disciplined I was, there was absolutely no way that I could ever be perfect. I knew I was supposed to love Jesus and that Jesus supposedly loved me, but these words terrified me. And to a certain point, they should. Jesus is revealing what he demands from this world.

But, his demands are not the barking of a cruel despot. His demands are the ideals and purposes for which we were made. His demands are simply revealing how far we have fallen and what we have lost in that very great fall. So, yes, Jesus said, *“You therefore must be perfect, as you heavenly Father is perfect.”* He said it as a summary of what he has said so far. His point is that the people in his kingdom are people who look like Him and his Father. They are humble (5.3). They are grieved by sin (5.4). They are not show-offs, nor arrogant know-it-all. Oh, they are strong, but it is a strength that controls their

tongue, their temper, and their temptations. They long for holiness. They love purity. They rejoice in righteousness. And mercy? Oh my! They are so merciful! They are so kind. They are so gracious, thoughtful, caring, and moved with the needs of others. They are peacemakers. They are more concerned about effecting reconciliation than the drama of the disagreement. When reviled, they do not demand respect or their rights. In fact, they bless those who persecute them and count it a privilege to identify with the prophets who lost their lives because they were faithful to speak God's Word. Jesus takes these demands and applies them. His six examples of every day sorts of things show how his audience (and us) does not measure up. These examples are convicting. Anger, lust, divorce, keeping your word, retaliation and now loving your enemies are all making it clear that Jesus has not made any loopholes. This is what he demands. People do not need the answer, until they understand the question. Another way of saying that is, that people are not ready to embrace the solution, until they fully embrace their need.

One night after dinner, Cathi and I were talking with our son about the gospel. He was 6 years old. It was December and we were doing advent readings and songs as a family, when naturally the subject of Christ coming to earth was the topic. He knew that Christ had come to earth, but, all of the pieces of the story had not yet come together for him. That night I explained to him that God is absolutely righteous. In fact, God is so perfectly righteous that he cannot condone, or excuse even the slightest sin because the essence of sin is rebellion against him. If God excused even one sin, he would be saying that what is evil is okay. And God is incapable of doing that because God is incapable of believing that, because evil is not, nor ever okay. In fact, sin is so serious, that God demands a payment, a sacrifice, for sin. But the payment is something that we cannot give. It is beyond us. I really did not have to say anything more. I remember where he was standing when the weight of this fell upon him that night. I watched as the hope, in this happy little boy, drained out of him. I wanted so much to tell him the rest of the story, but I knew that I needed to wait. He needed to know, not just intellectually, he needed to know personally that he was lost, he was hopeless and there was not a thing that he could do about it. That night, he became undone. He was desperate for a solution and I was so glad to tell him, that even though he could not pay for his sin, Jesus did. In fact, he paid it all. That is what is going on in this sermon. Jesus demands a standard from you that only he can reach. But, he reached that for you. And when you become a follower of Christ, he gives you a desire to live this way, not as a duty to perform, but as a delight to embrace because he enables you to pursue this. Who looks at an enemy as an opportunity to show grace? God does. And so do his people, because he did that to us. Let's dig in.

I. **Hating your enemy is wrong!** (43-44)

By the way, this is a very loving thing for Jesus to say. He is telling some people that they are believing and practicing a lie. There are people, in Jesus' day, which held to a wrong interpretation of God's Word. They concluded that since loving your neighbor was commanded by God, that it was acceptable and in fact, it was your duty to hate your enemy. God never said that. But people believed that, assumed that, and acted upon it. It was (shall we say) their culture. It's how they did things and Jesus blows it up!

Jesus is expressing love by confronting, exposing and correcting these false views. By doing this, Jesus is giving us a great example of what love really is. Jesus is rejecting the popular and ridiculous idea that love means you always make the other person feel better. Jesus is articulating a radical departure from what we are told to believe. We believe that love is defined by the response of others. If you make me feel bad or others feel bad, then you must be a hater. I know people think that; but is it true? Follow the logic: 1) If love means that you always make the other person feel better then 2) if you tell the other person that what they believe is wrong, and they will feel bad, then it is hateful for you to tell another person that he/she is wrong. The way this gets applied to God is rather obvious. 1) Since love means that you always make the person feel better and since 2) God is love, then 3) God will never tell you that you are wrong, or that your religion is wrong. He knows that we all mean well and that in reality we all believe the same thing and all this doctrine stuff is really much ado about nothing. Since there have been so many fights about doctrine, then doctrine must be the problem, right? I mean, seriously, does it really matter what we believe, just as long as we love each other? Whoa! I just threw a logical fallacy at you. Did you catch it? Let me say it again. Does it really matter what we believe, just as long as we love each other? That statement assumes that truth and love cannot be friends. It also assumes that love is not a doctrine. And this is what I am so zealous for you to understand. Doctrine (truth) is the root and foundation of love. True doctrine is the soil from which true love grows. Truth and love are not enemies. Truth and love are inseparably married to each other in Christ! Knowing the right truths does not guarantee deep love. This was clear by the response of James and John to the people in a little village of Samaria who would not welcome Christ to their town. James and John asked Jesus if they could call down fire on the people. They were offended at the rejection of Christ, but Christ was offended at their reaction and he rebuked them. James and John believed the right truth, but right belief does not guarantee deep love. But not knowing the right truths guarantees loving the wrong things.

Jesus is telling people that what they believed and practiced was wrong. Jesus said this. Jesus loved them enough to say this. Jesus loved others enough to say that what they had been taught and what they believed was wrong and they were religious people. Jesus is telling them that their religious beliefs are wrong! It is not hateful to do that. It is hateful not to do that. Jesus is telling them that they not only got this wrong, but they missed the point of the entire law that God had given to them. Do you remember the account in Matt.22 when Christ is challenged to come up with the 1<sup>st</sup> and greatest commandment? Jesus answered, “You are to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul and mind and the second is like it, in that you are to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commands hang all of the law and the prophets. Love God and love others! There is no room for hating others, even if they are your enemies.

Even as Jesus is talking to them about enemies, he is making enemies. Throughout this entire sermon Jesus has been exposing the hypocrites, the false teachers and the false teaching. He does it again, right here. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But (in other words, I, the incarnate Word of God, God in the flesh, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Trinity, the agent of creation, the King of Glory

and Lord of lords am now speaking and I am telling you what is and what isn't) I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

## II. **Just loving your neighbor is not good enough.** (46-47)

But hey, I know some people who call themselves Christians who if they would at least love their neighbors, it would be a major upgrade. But Jesus points out the fact that if you love your neighbor, you are not doing anything unusual. The fact is, even the worst kinds of people love those who love them. I say “worst kinds of people” not because Jesus thought that tax collectors and Gentiles were the worst kinds of people, but because his audience did. In fact, it always cracks me up a bit when Matthew quotes Jesus using the title, “tax collectors” in such a disparaging way. I wonder if Jesus didn't look Matthew's way and give him a little nod, or something since Jesus had chosen Matthew, a known tax collector, to be his disciple. Tax collectors had not only compromised themselves because of their business and personal relations with the Romans, but they were making crazy money off of their occupation at the expense of their fellow Jews. And a Gentile? A Gentile was not simply a non-Jew; a Gentile was a pagan, idol-worshiper. It was a serious insult to call someone a tax collector or a Gentile. But Jesus is pointing out the obvious. Do not think that you are knocking yourself out simply because you love those who love you. Everyone does that. If you only greet those you know...let me explain that one.

Here is the scene. You are walking down the road to the market. You pass your neighbors, many of whom are relatives of some sort. You nod, smile and say, “Shalom” which is a prayer of peace and blessing for them. You may do it without much thought because it is a habit, but still you do it, until a Roman soldier walks by. Now, what was mindless becomes intentional. At this point, your face changes and your eyes look elsewhere. You despise the Romans. These Gentiles are defiling your land. While you may say “shalom” somewhat mindlessly to your neighbors, you are not about to say it to a Roman. You cannot curse him, without getting punished, but you are not about to bless him. So, you say nothing because in your heart you are cursing him. And, of course, he doesn't greet you either. But, then you notice this. The soldier sees another soldier and they both greet each other with warmth. They pretend not to notice you, but of course you pretended not to notice them. And Jesus simply says, “What's the difference?” If you are so much better than the Romans, why are you all playing by the same rules?”

It's a good question. Who do you avoid? Is there a neighbor, a co-worker, a family member, or even another church member whose eye contact you try to avoid? Why? And I want you to think deeper than, “it's just awkward.” Why are you so reluctant to have eye contact with that person? Do you, in your heart of hearts believe that you are better than the other person; that the other person is not deserving of, or worthy of your notice, or your approval, or even of a greeting? Do you believe that the other person is beneath you? What about them do you resent so much that you have the right to withhold from them even civil discourse? What is it about them that drives you to refuse to give them anything that is favorable, even a look, or a word, or a wave? You will love those who love you. But why do we love God? We only love because he first loved us. That is the point that Jesus is making.

### III. Loving your enemy puts God on display. (45, 48)

Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! “Yea, I’ll pray for them. I’ll pray that the fleas of thousands camels will invade their armpits. I don’t think that is what Jesus had in mind. He said that if you only love your neighbor, then you are not doing anything special. Loving your enemy is powerful, not only because it is unusual, but this is what God does. Look at v.45. “*So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.*” This is a phrase that is describing purpose, not means. Does that make sense? Jesus is not saying that you become a son by means of loving your enemy; he is saying that you love your enemy with the purpose of, as a son, reflecting your Father. So, what is your Father like? That is answered by looking at what He does. God loves his enemies so much that he causes the sun to shine upon them and the rain to fall. These are two critical components for life in an agricultural society. There were believing farmers and pagan farmers. Both groups received sun and rain. How can God let the sun shine on people who rebel against him? We are tempted to ask, how can a loving God send anyone to hell? We ask that question because we are ignorant. The real question is, how can a righteous God send anyone to heaven?

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? The Jews had watered down the law of God. They had twisted God’s word and had lowered the standard. They made excuses for themselves, loopholes and concessions so that they could appear to be pious. So, Jesus exposes that and he establishes the intent of the law, but at the same time, he is revealing the heart of God behind it all. God is incredibly merciful. Therefore, those who are citizens of his kingdom are to reflect him. God is merciful to his enemies. He shows love to them, so should you. This means that...

#### **A. True children of God will have enemies.**

True children of God will have adversity. There are people in your world who are enemies. It is not wrong for you to understand that and identify them as that. Having an enemy does not automatically mean that you are wrong. Sometimes I will hear at a funeral that so and so never had an enemy. Sometimes that is because the person never spoke the truth or stood up for anything.

#### **B. Your enemies are opportunities for you to show grace.** (44-47)

Enemies are simply God-ordained opportunities to show grace. But only God, through Christ, can give you grace to show your enemies grace. The world is not amazed if you are nice to your friends, but is stunned if you are generous to an adversary.

Two years ago, a group of people in the south moved to a small town in Vermont in order to plant a church. Vermonters do not, for the most part, think that they are in need of a church, especially from people in the south. While there was some gospel fruit, there was a lot of hostility. Town meetings were hostile. A sizeable group from the city demanded that the group be forbidden from meeting in the town, despite the fact that they had a

signed lease agreement. Rumors, gossip, malicious accusations about them began to go through the entire town. In the midst of this, the church attempted to press on. One Sunday morning, while they were meeting in the upstairs room of a building, a worker showed up to work on a project in the room underneath them. Was it intentional? I don't know. But, the banging of wood and high pitched whine of electric tools made it almost impossible to have any fruitful meeting for the church. So, a member of the church went downstairs to see if the guy could hold off until they were done upstairs. The worker cursed him out. After the service, a few guys from the church got together and decided to go downstairs and do something about it. They did all right. They went downstairs and helped him with his project. Who does that? We do. Why? Because...

### **C. You used to be an enemy of God.**

Romans 5.10 says, *“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”*

Paul's point is this. If this is how God treats his enemies, can you imagine how he treats his kids? If, when you were an enemy of God, he loved you to death, that is, he loved you all the way to the death of his Son, then do you think that he loves you less now that you are his? Do you remember how Christ prayed for his enemies when he was on the cross? “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” If this is how Christ treats his enemies, can you imagine how he treats his friends? When you were an enemy of God, God did not ignore you. God did not look the other way and pretend not to notice you. God showed up in your face, in your life and in your heart. He came after you. He called you because if he didn't call you, you would never have called him. He loved you first. This is not only a truth for us to believe, and be humbled by and amazed by, this is a truth for us to proclaim and reflect. When we love our enemies, we get them wondering. If that is how they treat their enemies, I wonder how they treat their friends. By the way, God is going to give you adversity and enemies so that you can put this on display, maybe this week. But...

### **D. You can only show grace if you have received grace.**

Loving an enemy in order to point them to Christ is absolutely impossible unless you have first trusted in Christ as your Savior. Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” A son is a reflection of his Father. You cannot reflect the Father, unless you are first a son. But, if you are considering becoming a follower of Christ, you need to know what it means to be his child. Trusting Christ as Savior is accepting the call to live like him. We cannot do it, on our own. But, it is a delight that embrace and a joy that we pursue.

Conclusion:

- 1) What tangible expression of love will you attempt this week toward an enemy?
- 2) Will you pray for that person, right now? I encourage you to pray for that person every day this week, while you pray for yourself.