

Radical Love

Our New Testament reading is Matthew 5:43-48, as today we look at the sixth and final illustration Jesus gives us about the surpassing righteousness that he expects from us as his followers. We look at what is perhaps the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus says about radical love.

Follow as I read **Matthew 5:43-48**.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In recent sermons we've considered what it means to be a radical follower of Christ. I'm convinced that being radical isn't necessarily making a drastic career change and going to the furthest, most challenging mission field or even giving the most sacrificial offering to missions or to the poor. Radical has to do with the degree of our love for Jesus and the extent we allow him to transform our lives "from the inside out."

So today we look at the "Mt Everest" of the Sermon on the Mount and perhaps of all of the teachings of Jesus, a pinnacle of his teachings that calls for our highest conduct, far above the normal expectations of the culture around us. I don't know about you, but what we've seen from the Sermon on the Mount has me that the only way I can ever live up to Jesus' call to a righteousness that exceeds that of the religious legalists (20) is by his grace and the power of the Holy Spirit. By myself, I feel overwhelmed by this high calling. But as one pastor (M Lloyd-Jones) says, the humanly impossible demands of the sermon should not discourage us, but rather compliment us. He explains that as God's children we are given a special empowerment to enable us to live on a higher, a supra normal level of morality. The follower of Jesus is a special kind of person indeed—one of radical love.

The Great Commandment, as Jesus also asserted, is to love God with one's whole being and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 21:34 and Mk. 12:28-31; Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). Certainly one's neighbors would include those who are closest to us. We are to give our love to those who belong to us, in our family and among our friends and also within the family of God.

Jesus taught us that we're to have special love for our fellow believers, becoming a servant to one another. In fact, this was the "new command" Jesus gave, that we "Love one another" (Jn. 13:34). In fact, this would be how people would know we are his followers, "if (we) love one another" (35). Jesus has given us his spiritual family, the body of Christ, the church, which is based on

loving relationships (Matt. 12:46-50). In his first letter, the Apostle John stresses that love for one another is a sign of genuine salvation, and to not love one's brother and sister is evidence one is unconverted (1 Jn. 3:11-24; 4:7-21). And we've noted the commitment we've made to love our spouse, our children, parents, friends and fellow believers, who are all an important part of the network of kingdom covenant relationships.

The Greek language uses four words for "love," and they are translated as family love (particularly between parents and children), friendship love, erotic love, and charity, "agape" love. CS Lewis distinguishes between need-loves and gift-loves, noting that in some way we humans need to receive and give all of these loves. God alone has no need for love and simply and undeservedly gives us his love (11ff, 33ff, 53ff, 73ff, 87ff, 131ff, 163ff). God gives us his charity, his unconditional agape, which is unselfish giving and caring even for the undeserving. Outside of the New Testament, the concept of agape, as in classical Greek literature, was a "weak and anemic" word, but the New Testament gave "meaning and power to it" (Robinson). Agape is the love that is expressed in John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

As one has said, God's love is usually explained in light of the cross. In fact, "There is hardly a verse in the New Testament that speaks of God's love outside of the context of the cross" (Boice), where God supremely demonstrated his love (Rom. 5:6-11).

This concept of loving those who love us or at least like us and are like us (what Lewis calls need-love) is the one that dominated the understanding of even the religious leaders of Jesus' day. But Jesus spoke of and demonstrated God-like love, his agape Gift-love. The difference between Jesus' understanding and requirement and that of the religious bureaucracy and the typical Jew of the day was in the definition of "neighbor."

Most Jews of the day understood neighbor to be fellow Jews and especially those who were in good standing with them, and certainly not one's enemies. Their standard understanding was that we love those like us and those who like us and we hate everyone else, especially those outside our religious category, such as the tax collectors and "pagans."

Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, showing that our neighbor is anyone in need, including an enemy, as a Jew was regarded by a Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). Radical love is love, not just for one's neighbors, but even for one's enemies.

Scholar Alfred Plummer said, "To return evil for good is devilish. To return good for good is human; and to return good for evil is divine."

Examples abound of this kind of radical love, such as the story of Elizabeth Elliot (b.1926). After the ruthless murder in 1956 of her husband, Jim, who

along with other missionaries had attempted to take the message of Jesus to the Aucas (now known as the Huaorani) in the jungles of Eastern Ecuador, Elizabeth acted with God's gift-love. Sometime afterward she went with her child and other missionary friends to take the message of Jesus to this same tribe that had murdered her husband and his colleagues.

It's likely that God has placed people in our lives who need his undeserved gift-love, just as we needed his gift-love for us when we were undeserving and hopelessly lost sinners. Maybe the one God has give you to love is a work colleague, supervisor, neighbor, teacher, student, spouse, parent or child. And how do we love people who seem, not just indifferent, but even hostile to us?

This God-like love can be most difficult to express, particularly to those closest to us, who are likely to hurt us the most. Married couples, for example, often are headed for the divorce court because they are no longer "in love," and perhaps have become disappointed in each other, hurt by each other or enamored with someone else. The command of God is that we love our enemies, and one's spouse may have become the enemy. Love may be the farthest thing from the mind of the offended spouse, yet Jesus commands love, which means serving the other in a practical way. And through the practical giving of undeserved gift-love, there's the possibility of the restoration of need-love, with the offending spouse coming back into a restored relationship.

Jesus said, "Pray for those who persecute you" (44). Only by prayer can we experience and express this radical love for our enemies. Just as Jesus prayed from the cross (Lk. 23:34) and Stephen, when he was being stoned to death (Acts 7:60), so we are enabled, by the indwelling Spirit and the presence of the risen Lord Jesus, to pray for our enemies and persecutors. When we begin to pray for our enemies, our hearts, at least our emotions, may not be totally engaged in this effort. But the more we pray the more the Spirit of Jesus takes over, and we begin to think and to feel differently about our enemies. Through prayer, God indeed may change their hearts and transform enemies into friends. But also, when we pray for our enemies, we ourselves are transformed into Christ-like people, which is even more important.

Praying for our enemies can have as much or more impact on us than on our enemies. Kent Hughes shares a story about a friend of his wife, who had with her family just returned from the mission field and "had rented a rather nice townhouse—at least it was nice compared to what they'd had on the mission field. She is a very creative person," notes Hughes, "and did a wonderful job of decorating the place, and they settled in. Only one thing was wrong—the family who moved in next door. They turned the front yard into a desert, broke the windows out of their house, were always using foul language, urinated in the front yard, and generally caused havoc in the neighborhood. The final straw was when one of the boys climbed into our friends' yard and threw a whole can of orange paint over the patio walls. My wife's friend was really angry. She did not like her neighbors. She was not happy with the Lord for putting her where he had put her. Realizing that her heart was not right, she got down on her knees and said, 'Lord, you know that I do not like these people at all. God, help me to love them.' She did not feel any different," notes

Hughes, “but she resolved to exercise love. She baked her neighbors a pie and took it to them, thus beginning a caring relationship. Those neighbors did not change,” notes Hughes, “but she did. She had begun to love them. When those neighbors moved away, she wept.” Pastor Hughes concludes, “What an example of intelligent, volitional love that says, ‘I will love by the grace of Christ within me.’”

The radical love Jesus demands is not possible from our own humanity. Reciprocal love is no great accomplishment. But radical love, such as that of Elizabeth Elliot and the above-mentioned friend of Mrs. Hughes, is possible only by the grace and Spirit of God.

CS Lewis noted: “Divine Gift-love in the man enables him to love what is not naturally lovable: lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior and the sneering.” Again, we must look to the Christ of the cross and resurrection for the power and grace to love in the same kind of way that he loves us unconditionally. What is it that sets the Christian apart from the rest of the world? Is it our minding our manners, church affiliation and attendance? I think a key word in our text is hidden away in our translations in verse 47, the Greek word for “excess.” Jesus asks if our love exceeds that of the tax collectors and unconverted pagans for their friends who love them. As Bonhoeffer says, the hallmark of the Christian is this excessive, extraordinary love for one’s enemies that reflects the excessive, extraordinary love of God on the cross.

This is the radical love that sets us apart from the rest, labeling us as God’s children, giving us the family resemblance. More than any of my siblings, I most resembled my father. It was impossible for me to attend a ministers’ conference, where my father was well known, and not have someone remark, “Roger looks like Ray did 30 years ago”; “He’s a chip off the old block”; or “Roger, you look just like your dad.” I was proud of that identity, but I should yearn for a greater identity with my heavenly Father, which doesn’t come through mannerisms or outward appearance, but through a heart that loves like he loves—sacrificially and unconditionally. I want people to think of Jesus when they relate to me and experience my ministry and my friendship, my acceptance and my forgiveness if they’ve wronged me (1 Jn. 4:12).

The question of rewards appears again (46), reminding us that God desires to reward his people and our desire for reward has its proper place. Rewards are not materialistic, external benefits and incentives, but God’s rewards are the “natural” outcome, fulfillment and result of obedience. For example, the aforementioned lady who prayed for her obnoxious neighbors received the reward of greater love and compassion, despite their unchanged behavior. The more we love radically the more we are transformed personally.

Sometimes this radical love yields its immediate rewards, such as the transformation of enemies into our friends, and even more significantly, into reconciled friends of God. I think of the eternal rewards awaiting Elizabeth Elliot, for example, whose testimony of radical love for her enemies has led to

the conversion of many Ecuadorian Indians, but also countless others who have been touched by her example.

Perhaps the greatest reward is simply our own character, conformed more to the likeness of Jesus, who is at work already achieving in us an eternal glory that far outweighs any comparably “light and momentary troubles” we might experience from our enemies (2 Cor. 4:17, NIV).

This passage indeed is the “summit” of the sermon, taking us all the way to the command of Jesus for us to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (48). So, we not only are to have a surpassing righteousness (20), but also a perfect righteousness (48)! The present imperative is the command to keep striving until we, by the grace of God, finally reach perfection when we see Jesus face to face (1 Jn. 3:2). This perfection is our goal toward which we press daily in this life, though never fully achieve (Philippians 3:12ff).

The Scriptures speak of sinless perfection that’s never fully achieved while we are in these mortal, sin-prone bodies, but Scripture also speaks of perfection in the sense of maturity and full capability to do the work and will of God (2 Timothy 2:15; 3:16f). To love God perfectly perhaps means to have “all our thoughts and actions mastered by love” (Morgan). To be a person dictated by love is for me being a radical Christian. We’re called to radical love, to live and to love supra-naturally as God’s redeemed, Jesus-like, Spirit-filled people. May God give us his grace to love with radical love!