

The Principle of Love

MATTHEW 5:44-48

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IN THE FIFTH CHAPTER OF MATTHEW, WE HAVE already seen how Jesus used the issues of murder and adultery and divorce and lying and seeking revenge to illustrate how a certain person's righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees if that person hopes to enter into heaven. In responding to each one of those issues, Jesus laid down a principle to follow. Rather than defining morality with a list of dos and don'ts, Jesus taught principles. We can achieve the righteousness of the Pharisees by depending on human strength and discipline to obey all the **rules** they taught. In contrast, the kind of righteousness Jesus talked about is only achieved by obeying the **principles** He taught. And that is humanly impossible to do. It is only possible with the grace of God. Only a person who is born again and has received eternal life can do it.

Today we will look at the sixth and last illustration used by Jesus to drive home this truth. The issue has to deal with love and hate. The Pharisees made it clear to the Jewish people whom they were to love and whom they were to hate. In contrast to this teaching, Jesus gives us the principle of love, and He tells us we are supposed to love everyone, even our enemies.

With each one of these illustrations, Jesus begins by quoting a saying that had been taught for many years by the Pharisees. Up to this point, the sayings are either misquotes from the Old Testament or direct quotes taken out of their context and given a meaning they were never intended to have. But today we will look at a saying that is neither a misquote nor is it a quote taken out of context. It is a saying that is found nowhere in the Old Testament. The saying is this: "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." The Pharisees interpreted this saying by defining 'neighbor' as an Israelite. In other words, they taught that Jews were supposed to love Jews. Now it is bad enough for one ethnic group to restrict their love just to people from their own group, but the Pharisees did something even worse. They not only taught the Israelites to treat people outside their ethnic group as foreigners, but they also taught the Jewish people to treat the foreigners as enemies. They even went so far as to say that it was their duty to hate these foreigners.

How did the Pharisees come up with this saying? In all

likelihood, they had looked at some of the Old Testament passages where God commands the children of Israel to exterminate certain groups of people. When the Jews entered the Promised Land of Canaan, they were commanded by God to exterminate the Canaanites. Pastor Tim pointed this out to us last week. On top of this, God also told the Jews not to treat the Amorites and Moabites and Midianites with kindness. God told the Children of Israel that the memory of the Amalekites was to be blotted out from under heaven because of certain things they had done. In addition to these commands, we also have certain Psalms that record curses toward people who have been labeled as enemies. Take Psalm 69 for instance. Psalm 69:22-25 records King David cursing his enemies. He says, "May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents."

Now, let's try to sympathize with the Pharisees for a moment. In light of such commands and curses recorded in the Bible, it is not that hard to see how they would conclude that Jews should only love Jews and hate everyone who is not a Jew. But such a conclusion is wrong, and we need to understand why it is wrong. What was their mistake?

Their mistake lay in the fact that they failed to realize the difference between judgement and hate. The commands God gave to the Children of Israel to exterminate certain nations, were pronouncements of judgement by God Himself. He was commanding Israel to carry out His judgement upon other nations. The curses recorded in the Psalms are also pronouncements of judgement. They are statements where the Psalm writer is agreeing with the judgement God has promised to groups of people who dishonor God with their terrible behavior. The Pharisees took these pronouncements of God's judgement and they translated them into a statement that encouraged the Jews to harbor feelings of hate toward those who were different from themselves. The Pharisees knew that the Bible teaches us to love our neighbors, but they failed to see that neighbors included everyone, even their enemies and even the very people God was judging.

It is one thing for God to judge a group of people for the sins they have committed and it is quite another thing for men to hate other men for any reason at all. The Pharisees confused these two things. They saw how God judged people who dishonored His name, and they interpreted such judgement as hate. They read how God commanded their forefathers to carry out His judgement, and they interpreted such a command as a command to hate.

This was a terrible mistake for them to make, because God never hated the people He judged and God never wanted the Children of Israel to hate them either. In our scripture reading, Jesus is recorded as saying, "Love your enemies." Jesus is God, and what He was saying reflects the heart of God that never changes. God loved those who dishonored Him during Old Testament times, and God loves those who dishonored Him during New Testament times.

In the New Testament God does not command His People to carry out His judgments by exterminating other groups of people. That command is only found in the Old Testament. No such command has ever been given to the New Testament Church. But this does not mean God has stopped judging people. We do find pronouncements of judgment in the New Testament. Matthew 23 records seven awful statements of judgment. Seven times our Lord's voice thundered with the terrible words, 'Woe to you Pharisees, for you have done this or that thing bringing dishonor to God.' God continues to judge people. His wrath is still revealed—even in the form of war—against those who reject truth and dishonor his name. But He still loves even the people He judges, and He wants His children to be like Him. He wants His children to love so they will be sons of their Father in heaven who also loves. God wants His children to be like their heavenly Father who, in regard to this matter of love, is perfect. This is the principle of love that the Pharisees failed to see.

The principle of love is the climax of all the principles Jesus has taught up to this point. It is, therefore (humanly speaking), the most difficult of all to follow. If you thought it was humanly impossible to die to self, then this principle should make you feel even more hopeless in using your own strength to get into the kingdom of heaven.

In the previous paragraph Jesus told us not to resist the evil person when he strikes us. The average person will think that to be humanly impossible. But now Jesus takes it a step further. Not only must we resist hitting back, we must also take positive steps to love this person who is hitting us. We must see the person who is offending us as our neighbor, and we must love him. That is humanly impossible to do. But that is exactly

what God says must be done, and the Pharisees failed to see it.

Let's now turn from the error of the Pharisees and attempt to understand the principle of love in more detail through the teaching of Jesus recorded in our scripture lesson. What I have to share will only touch the surface of a subject far beyond my ability to totally comprehend. As one hymn writer put it: "The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell. It goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell. To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry; nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky." What I have to share with you now will only scratch the surface, but if it does that, then I will be happy. I will emphasize three things from our Lord's teaching.

The first thing I need to emphasize about God's love is that **it is a love that is detached**. In verse 45 Jesus said, "God causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." God's treatment of people is not conditioned by their treatment of Him. In that sense, His love for people is detached from their behavior.

God does not love us because we are lovely. He loves us in spite of the fact that we are very unlovely. When God went to the cross to die for our sins, He was moved to do so by His own eternal heart of love that was unmoved by anything outside of itself. It was detached. Nothing is going to distract God from loving. He will cause His sun to rise on us and He will send us rain regardless of how ugly and unlovely we are.

Now this is an extremely important principle, because we are supposed to have the same kind of love. We must be detached from people in the sense that our treatment of them is not governed by what they do. How is that possible? It is only possible if we first become detached from ourselves. If we are not detached from our own self, then we will never be detached from what others do to that self. As long as I am living for myself, I will be extremely sensitive to what other people do to me and say about me. I will try to second-guess the meaning behind their words and actions. I will be jealous and envious and always wondering what people are thinking. I will never be able to love other people unless I can first be detached from my own prideful self.

Can you see the relationship between the principle of love and the principle of dying to self? One is dependent on the other. I must first stop caring so much about myself. Only then will my treatment of others be detached from their behavior.

Looking at it from another perspective, we can say that being detached is freedom from control. People control us. They control so much of what we do and what we think. During this past week some unkind and cruel thoughts have entered into the minds of most of us in this auditorium. Can you remember what brought those thoughts on? Most likely it was someone else. You saw a particular person or you heard a particular person speaking or the memory of a certain person came to your mind and you became upset. If you had not seen that person or heard his voice or thought about him, you would have felt peace instead of anxiety. We must admit to the truth. Other people control a great deal of what we think and what we do.

Now Jesus is calling us to rid ourselves from this condition. He is calling us to detach ourselves from the control of other people. The only way we can do that is by looking at the situation from God's perspective. When we see or hear or think about people doing evil things, we must understand that Satan is the real enemy. The person who appears to be evil is under the control of the devil. That is the way God looks at things, and that is the way we must view things also. When we view things from that perspective, our feelings of annoyance will become feelings of pity and we will do everything in our power to save the person who is acting in an ungodly manner.

I don't want to overdue this point, but I feel it is extremely important for us to understand our Lord's teaching, so I will use another illustration to emphasize this principle of detachment. When I first became a Christian and decided to leave the Catholic Church and attend a protestant seminary, some of my professors at Penn State and some of my relatives began to treat me with great disrespect. They felt I was wasting all the good education I received and turning my back on everything that was important. I was yelled at on a daily basis for an extended period of time. But it was during that great trial that I learned a lesson I hope I will never forget. The lesson is simply this: God calls us to love people we don't like. Jesus said, "Love your enemies." He did not say, "Like your enemies." We are not commanded to like. We are commanded to love, and there is a great difference between the two. Our ability to like another person depends on many factors like personality and interests and philosophy of life and a thousand other things. But our ability to love must not be dependent on any of these things. It must be detached from these things and dependent on God alone. His love alone must inspire us to love others.

I once preached this concept in a church. Afterwards someone called me on the phone and asked me, "Are you saying that it is right to love and not like a person at the same time?" "Yes," I told that person, "That is

exactly what I am saying." The person's reaction was one of puzzlement. He had never thought of it that way before, and he was not sure I was right. But we need to think of it that way. We need to be honest with our emotions, but we must not be slaves to our emotions. We must detach ourselves and be free to love others in spite of whether or not we like them. This is the first point I want to emphasize about the principle of love.

The last two points come from verse 44 as we read it from the King James Version. "But I say unto you, 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you and persecute you.'" These words shed light on the principle of love by describing it as an active love and a love that has prayer as its foundation.

Let's first consider the active characteristic of love. Jesus said, "Bless them that curse you *and* do good to them that hate you." What Jesus is basically saying is this, 'When people say harsh words, reply with kind words. When a person treats you in a cruel way, counter such action with activity that will bless that person.'

But when we do this, we must be very careful. When we actively work to love those who treat us in a bad way, we must be sure we do not attach conditions to what we are doing. There are two common mistakes people (and especially Christians) make when practicing active love. One mistake is to think our active love will turn our enemies into our friends. That might happen, but that should never become our motive. I know it feels good to have people like us. And when our active love produces a kind word or a smile, our tendency is to allow that good feeling to become our motivation to continue with our active love. But to do this only leads to reattaching ourselves to the very things God wants to free us from. As soon as we allow our active love to be conditioned by the response we get from the person we are actively working to love, then we are bound to get hurt. That doesn't mean we shouldn't have good feelings when we get a positive response. It only means that we must keep our motives for loving pure, without any strings attached.

Closely related to the mistake of actively loving other people so we can turn them into our friends is the mistake of thinking our active love can actually change people. Perhaps we are not so concerned that the people we love become our friends, but we are concerned that they change. This is a good concern to have, but it is wrong to think our active love can actually change people. It will hopefully point them to God who will change them. But we must go on loving them whether they change or not.

When people get married, they pledge themselves to active love. For Christians, that means spending the rest of your life helping your mate to know God more than he or she does. When we see our active love pointing our mate toward God who then, in turn, changes our mate to become more Christ like, that is a cause for rejoicing. However, there are times when active love does not succeed in influencing our mate to turn to God and change.

I recently heard the testimony of an elderly Christian woman who spent over 50 years actively loving her husband and always hoping that he would respond by growing closer to God. But he never did. When her husband finally died, as far as the woman knew, he was still far away from God. But she did the right thing. She did not make the mistake of thinking her love could force her husband to change. She spent her life loving her husband because she knew that her heavenly father loved her husband. That is enough. When we practice active love, we must be very careful not to let our motives go beyond this. We must not let ourselves be motivated by anything other than the love of God.

Then, finally, we come to the matter of prayer. Jesus said, "Pray for them who despitefully use you and persecute you." Prayer must become the foundation of our love. Only through prayer can we find the power to love the way our heavenly Father loved. And prayer is the final test of our love to see if it is genuine or not and to see if it is like the love of our heavenly Father.

When we are able to get on our knees and faithfully and genuinely pray for the people who treat us badly, then we have proven ourselves to be like our heavenly Father in the way that we love.

The real battle takes place in prayer. That's where we die to ourselves. That's where we begin to see things from God's perspective. It is in prayer that we resolve to take active steps to speak and act kindly to those who curse us and treat us cruelly. It is in prayer that we ask God to have mercy on these people and even ask that he spare them from punishment. Look at the prayer of Jesus when He was being crucified. "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing (Luke 23:34)." And look at the prayer of one of God's children, Stephen, in Acts 7:60 when he was being stoned to death. "Lord," he cried out with a loud voice,

"Do not hold this sin against them. Are our hearts so full of compassion that we can pray for our enemies in that way? Stephen was so concerned for the people who were executing him that he totally forgot about himself. It is only in prayer that we can find the strength to love like that.

We have just celebrated Valentine's Day, a day set aside to express love toward those who are close to us. But the true test of love is not in the flowers or cards or candy or fancy dinner that we give. It is not even in the nice words we say to each other. The true test of our love is the time we spend on our knees praying for the people we like as well as the people we dislike.

I don't know about you, but I find the words of Jesus to be very condemning. How can I live up to such a principle? I must throw myself at the mercy of my heavenly Father and ask Him to save me. Without His salvation, I cannot even begin to live up to these principles. Oh how I desire to experience His salvation day by day so I can live up to these principles.

Do you have the same desire? Can we ask God today to give us the strength we need to love the way we should? If you have never asked God to save you, will you do it today? Only God can put this desire in your heart. And, if He has, then salvation is knocking at your door. Does the sight or sound or memory of certain people cause you to struggle with feelings that tear you apart? Jesus wants to free you from that. He wants to give you the strength to respond to cruel words and cruel treatment with active love. He wants to meet you in prayer so that you can see things from His perspective and love the way He loves. If you have never surrendered to Him, will you do it today? Please pray with me in your heart as I lead you in a simple prayer asking for salvation.

Father in heaven, I have heard Your words today. You have told me to love my enemies so that I might become your son and you my Father. I now want to become like you. I want to detach myself from my own pride so I can love people unconditionally. I want to do good to those who hate me and pray for them who use me and treat me badly. I can't do this by myself. I know I can't. Help me. Save me. Make me like you. I pray this in Jesus name. Amen.