

## Appendix #4: Love Your Enemies

### The Meaning of 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 sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. [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, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? [48] You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

This text presents a central teaching of Jesus. It comes as the climax of six examples of the greater righteousness of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). It teaches us to love our enemies. Here are four things that we learn from this passage along with other teaching on this topic.

**1. Jesus teaches us to return good for evil.** Moses clearly allowed returning evil for evil, harm for harm. We see this in the verses just before our focus, in 5:38 - "an eye for an eye." But even in our text we can see this. For, although Moses taught in Leviticus 19:18 to forsake revenge and love your neighbor, that is, your fellow Israelite, he also taught in Deuteronomy 23:3-6 to hate the enemy who is an outsider, the Ammonite and the Moabite.

More specifically, since these peoples did not give the Israelites food and water in their time of need after the exodus, but rather tried to curse them, Israel is commanded never to act for this people's well-being. In other words, they are to return evil for evil to these enemies. This is what Jesus is referring to when he says, "you have heard that it was said . . . hate your enemy."

After laying out Moses' position, Jesus moves beyond it. He says, "but, I say to you . . ."

- ♦ If you have an enemy, don't hate them, love them.
- ♦ If your enemy persecutes you, don't curse them, pray for them.

Jesus calls us to a higher standard. Even when someone harms you, return good for evil.

This teaching is echoed all throughout the New Testament. I Peter 3:9 says, "Do not repay evil for evil, or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary repay with a blessing." I Thessalonians 5:15 says, "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do what is good to one another and to all."

Although returning evil for evil is the standard of Moses, and it is the standard of worldly governments around us today, Jesus calls us to his higher way.

**2. This call to return good for evil is packaged in a contrast between incomplete love and complete love.**

- Incomplete love means only loving those who are like you, or those who do good to you.
- Complete, or perfect love means loving those who are like you *and* those who are not a part of your group. It means loving those who do good to you *and* those who harm you. It is complete love because it encompasses all people, not just certain categories.

Jesus gives two examples of incomplete love:

- In verse 46 the tax collectors love only a certain group - those who love them.
- In verse 47 the Gentiles greet only a certain kind of people - those in their own group.

Jesus also gives two examples of complete love. Neither of the first two groups are models of righteousness in Jesus' context. But for these examples, he points us to the Father in heaven, who is our example:

- In verse 45 the Father in heaven gives sunshine to the good *and* the evil.
- And also in verse 45 the Father in heaven gives rain to the righteous *and* the unrighteous.

In an agricultural context this means that God supplies food to all. So the Father's love is complete. It is all inclusive. He gives to the insiders and outsiders, to those who do him harm and those who do good. This is the meaning of verse 48. To "be perfect" (or it can also be translated "complete") is to be complete like the Father in your love. Have in your own life love that includes both the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous.

Now we always try to draw boundaries on who we love. Like the lawyer in Luke 10 we ask, "Who is my neighbor?" wondering if it really includes people like Samaritans. We try to tame Jesus' words so that our love does not have to be complete like the Father's. But the thrust of Jesus' words are clear. Our love is to encompass all people, all enemies, no matter in what context we encounter them.

**3. Enemy love is not an emotion or some inner intention. Rather it consists of concrete actions that help our enemies.** Jesus tells us to love our enemies. From the rest of Scripture we know that to love someone means to do good to them, to help them with their practical needs (I John 3:16-18). This is evident in this text in that the Father gives food to his enemies.

Jesus also tells us to pray for our persecutors. We are to ask for God's blessings to come into their lives. We are also to "greet" our enemies. This is not about whether we are rude to them or not. The greeting in that day was "peace," a word that functioned as a blessing. In greeting them, we give them a blessing.

In these two examples we see the contrast with Moses in Deuteronomy 23:

- The Ammonites did not give Israel food. Instead of returning evil for evil, we are to love and feed our enemies.
- The Ammonites sought to curse Israel. Instead of returning evil for evil, we are to pray for and bless our enemies.

The example of Jesus is instructive. When he was being arrested by his enemies and one of his disciples cut off the ear of one of them, Jesus stopped to rebuke his disciple and heal his enemy's ear (Luke 22:50). He acted in a practical way to help someone who was seeking to kill him. He also prayed for God's mercy for his enemies who executed him, even while he was dying on the cross (Luke 23:34).

If we look further in the New Testament at the example of the Father, we see that love includes self-sacrifice for enemies. Not only does God give food to his enemies, he gave his Son. Romans 5:8 says, "But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Paul goes on to say in verse 10, "while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God."

To love our enemy certainly does not mean killing them. Rather, it means that we act for the best interests of our enemy in practical ways, even to the point of self-sacrifice.

**4. There is a promise here for those who love their enemies.** Loving enemies is not easy. It takes a real yieldedness to God, strength from the Spirit, and faith that God will take care of you. It is hard.

As an encouragement to us, Jesus gives us a promise, which gives us hope. In verse 45 he says that we are to love our enemies, "so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." To be a "son" is not about being male. It is not about gender, but about a certain social status - the status of an inheritor. The son inherits the Father's blessings.

When we look at the overall context of Matthew 5:17-48 it is all about "Who will inherit the kingdom?" "Who will gain the Father's blessings?" Matthew 5:20 says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Then Jesus gives us six examples of the greater righteousness necessary to enter the kingdom, culminating in the example of enemy love.

So what Jesus is saying, is this - those who don't practice enemy love are no better than tax collectors and Gentiles. Their practice of righteousness is no different. But those who do practice enemy love, by God's help, imitate the Father in heaven. And by imitating the Father, they show that they are indeed true sons of the Father; for like Father, like son. And since they are true sons, they show themselves to be true inheritors of the Father's blessings. It is these who will enter into the blessings of the kingdom of heaven.

### Questions, questions

This teaching raises many questions - "What about this situation?" or "What if this happens?" We will look at one situation to lay out some principles. *What should you do if someone breaks into your house and seeks to harm your family?* We certainly want to protect our family, but Jesus also tells us to love our enemy.

First of all, we are not required to yield to the evildoer. (Jesus' teaching on this in Matthew 5:38-42 refers to oppressive authorities. It doesn't apply here). Rather, we are simply told to love our enemies. So this means we have some freedom to make some choices, within the bounds of love for our enemy. What does love allow?

- ♦ We can restrain or disarm an enemy. This is not unloving.
- ♦ We can call the police to restrain them, or if we think this might help them in the long run. But we are not to do it simply to seek to punish them.
- ♦ We can even harm an enemy to stop them. Not out of payback but because this is what is best for them. We would certainly not try to seriously wound or kill them. We would not give expression to our wrath. We would certainly not beat them in return as pay back. None of this has to do with love or returning good for evil.

With regard to this last point, sometimes harming someone is, in the bigger picture, what is best for them. For instance a doctor who has to cause a lot of pain to set a broken leg. Or who amputates a leg to save a life. The question we have to ask is this - "Is the harm we do redemptive (something that is in the enemies best interests) or is it non-redemptive (just giving harm for harm, trying to punish or destroy them)?"

When we ask, "What does love allow?" Jesus' golden rule can help (Matthew 7:12). Treat your enemy like you would want to be treated, if you were in their shoes. Or if it helps you, think like this: treat your enemy like a relative that you love who suddenly sought to harm you. What if it were your mother or son or daughter? Treat the enemy in the same way, with concern for their well-being.

The truth is that most of the time, in this situation, we would not have the options noted above. We would be powerless. In these situations we should follow the example of Jesus and place ourselves in harm's way, to bear suffering for our families or for others, if possible.

Also, in these kinds of situations, we need to hear the Spirit, who can give us just the right word or action that will avert harm. Perhaps doing good or being kind to the attacker will change their intention. We should pray and entrust ourselves into God's care and protection, whatever the case may be.

This is just one example. But Jesus' teaching on loving enemies applies to all of life, whether we have an enemy in our personal relationships, in a legal setting or in the context of war. Jesus calls us to love our enemies and to return good for evil.

### **Overcoming evil with good**

When someone harms us, it makes us want to harm them in return. But when we do so, as Paul says in Romans 12:21, "we are overcome by evil." We end up doing the same kinds of things our enemy has done – payback, revenge and evil. But if we give up the agenda of returning harm for harm, and instead love our enemies, we can know that God is more than able to handle all wrongs done against us. And he will. Paul says in Romans 12:19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"

Jesus is our example here. As 1 Peter 2:23 says, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." And what did God do? God vindicated him by raising him from the dead. And God also judged his enemies. Just as Jesus said, Jerusalem and all the corrupt social and political structures that acted to kill him were destroyed (Matthew 21:33-41; Luke 19:41-44).

We also can entrust ourselves to a God who judges justly. And having turned that agenda over to God, we can be free to love our enemies and return good for evil. In this way, instead of being overcome by evil, we can "overcome evil with good" – Romans 12:21.