

Sermon Notes of Rev Dr Ivor J.W.Oakley (20-8-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

**Matthew 5 v 43-48**

Additional reading Romans 12:9-21

**Love your enemies**

Introduction

Now sixth and final illustration of the kind of righteousness that is required from Christ's followers. Also sixth antithesis or contrast: **You have heard that it was said.... But I tell you...**

This is a warning against the perverted teaching and behaviour of religious leaders – the scribes and the Pharisees – alongside a description of the true righteousness required by Christ's followers. Here it is: **Love your enemies** (Matthew 5:44). Some see this as the most famous and central section of the Sermon on the Mount. And many others, especially those who leave out the significance and importance of Christ's person and work, and see Christianity as a list of ethical teachings, think this is what Christianity is all about. Even the average non-churchgoer knows about this, and is, of course, quick to condemn Christians and churchgoers because they do not live up to it.

As usual we will put this statement in context of what the Old Testament actually said, and the way it was perverted and misunderstood in the first century. Then look at precise meaning of Jesus' teaching. Finally face challenge of Jesus and see it as summary of whole of six antitheses. **What are you doing more than others?** (Matthew 5:47). What is special about your life?

The context of Jesus' teaching

**You have heard that it was said Love your neighbours and hate your enemy** (Matthew 5:43). Old Testament teaching was **Love your neighbour as yourself** (Leviticus 19:18). In the days of Jesus, this was perverted and twisted. "As yourself" was omitted, and "hate your enemy" was added. Indeed it was duty and business to hate enemy. So the typical Jew had utter hatred for Gentile dogs, saying they were fuel for the fires of hell, and had no time for Samaritan half-breeds, as stories in the Gospels make clear. While the Old Testament did urge stern judicial measures against the Amalekites and Canaanites, enforcing punishment for moral corruption and appalling evil, there was no command to hate enemies on personal level, and certainly not in Leviticus where the command to love your neighbour is found. In fact, in this very chapter are instructions not to ill-treat alien or foreigner. To be treated as fellow Jew (Leviticus 19:33-34). Leave gleanings of harvest and fallen grapes for poor and alien (Leviticus 19:10). Donkey of enemy straying to be brought back. Donkey of enemy to be lifted up if fallen under its load (Exodus 23:4-5). **If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink** (Proverbs 25:21).

Jesus explains that love for neighbour includes love for enemies. He is not denying the place for law and order, law courts, and punishment of offenders, but he is saying

that on the individual and personal level, love not just friends and relations, kind neighbours and people who do not harm you – but also love those who would harm you. Attitude is to be detached and not governed by the way others treat us and think about us. As long as we live for ourselves we are sensitive, watchful, jealous, and react to what others do. Therefore be detached from yourself.

Jesus not only taught it (c.f. parable of the Good Samaritan), but he also exemplified it **Father, forgive them** (Luke 23:34). ἐλεγεῖν is in the imperfect tense. Stephen said **Lord, do not hold this sin against them** (Acts 7:60). Here is the test of Christian character. Freedom from a spirit of revenge and spite and jealousy. In the sphere of personal relationships, love for hatred, kindness for evil.

### Meaning of Jesus' teaching

**Love your enemy ἀγαπάτε.** Four different Greek words translated as “love”: στοργή (storge) Family love; ἐρως (eros) Passionate sexual love; φιλία (filia) Affection, friendship; ἀγάπη (agape) Love for the unworthy and the undeserving, regardless of how he treats us. The latter is the kind of love God showed in giving his Son. This love is controlled by the will, not by the emotion, therefore not to be confused with liking (matter of temperament and upbringing). Agape love involves recognising, considering, and caring for others. Such love is very active and practical c.f. 1 Cor. 13. Concerned with personal relationships, not pacifism.

Luke's account spells this out in practice. **Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who ill-treat you** (Luke 6:27). “Pray” is a most profound injunction. It is the key to everything. Cure for hatred is prayer. Practice shows us we cannot hate and pray at the same time. Surest way to kill bitterness is to pray for the one who hates. Love is seen in deeds, words and prayers.

This is how God behaves and when you behave like this, you show that you are his child and bear his image and family likeness. His sun rises on evil and good. Sends rain on righteous and unrighteous. Divine love does not discriminate, so we must not discriminate in our love. Theologians call this “common grace”, as opposed to “saving grace”, which brings salvation. Common grace benefits all mankind with gifts of creation – rain and sunshine without which life could not continue on planet. Later on, Paul enlarges on this love in his saving grace. It was while we were ungodly sinners, God's enemies, that God loved us and Christ died for us (Romans 5:6,8,10).

Therefore, God has set the standard. Returning evil for good is the Devil's way; returning good for good is man's way; returning good for evil is God's way. **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect** (Matthew 5:48). So Jesus tells us to be perfect, be all round, all-inclusive, all embracing, as your heavenly Father is all round and all embracing. **The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made** (Psalm 145:9). **God so loved the world** (John 3:16). Nothing lovely or lovable about us, and yet he still loves us.

(N.B. This does not mean God is indifferent to sin. Nor does it mean that everyone is going to heaven, and there is no final judgement or hell for the impenitent. The one who preached the Sermon on the Mount had more to say about judgement and hell

than anyone else in the Bible. God does show amazing grace, but there will be final punishment for those who spurn that love and go on in impenitence.)

So we, in our love to others, are not to be indulgent and blind to sins. Love demands there is a place to correct, discipline and challenge. But love means it is done in a spirit aiming for highest good and not in a spirit of revenge or vindictiveness. So, like God, we should love our enemies. Thus we prove we share his nature because we are his children.

### Challenge which the Lord's teaching brings

In applying this teaching, what are you doing more than others? What is special about you? The world is not devoid of love. Parents love their children. Friends love their friends. People do good turns – in return for what is done to them or in hope of return, or because they value their standing before others, or do not want to let self down. “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”. “You owe me one”. “That makes us quits”. “Keep even”. We don’t like to be in debt to another.

But Jesus’ question is “Do you love your enemies, those who harm, gossip, criticize and try to destroy you?” Love with love like God’s for his enemies. That is something which men do not do by nature. Indeed, all good works and all human love, even the highest and best, are contaminated with different levels of self-interest.

Let’s extend this question to the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has been describing someone whose mentality and outlook is entirely and radically different from the world’s. Jesus has dealt with heart and motive, as well as outer actions, truthfulness, total self-denial, humility before God, sense of bankruptcy and helplessness, sense of unworthiness before God, mourning over sin, submission and dependence on God, seeking God with whole heart, longing for God, yearning to be like him. The Lord is speaking of a unique and special person. Not just someone who doesn’t do certain things. Yearning after the positive good, and not just trying to do his best. Not just doing the bare minimum, but overflowing. He delights in God’s law. Doesn’t just say “I am no saint, but there are plenty worse”. But joins with Wesley

*“Vile and full of sin I am”*

Aware of needing God’s grace. Not just making more effort, but a totally different person. Totally different outlook and power and aims. Not just believing there is a God who has to be feared and obeyed, but having a new relationship with God. Love for him and joy in his presence. Knows God intimately. Whole attitude to trials and tribulations, injuries and insults, and death itself, is different. Not just facing death with dignity and resignation, but knowing it is better than this life. Going to be with Christ. Preparing to depart triumphantly because he knows where he is going. Totally different, unique, special person. Jesus asks: What is special about you?

Cannot explain in natural terms. Enigma about him. Inexplicable. Not explain in terms of environment or upbringing or home influence. Something has happened to that man. God has been at work in him. Power of God at work in his life. Total change in life – in his attitude to sin, God, his Law, purpose of life, future, enemies.

The reason is he is a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Christ lives in him (Galatians 2:20). He is a partaker of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), born again, born

from above (John 3:3). The image of Christ is formed in him (Galatians 4:19). Presence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in grace and power means he is a changed and reformed person. He gets power and life and sustenance in the vine. He simply bears the fruit.

The Christian life, as described in the Sermon on the Mount, is a complete impossibility. But the God of the Bible is the God of miracles. By grace, the impossible becomes possible. This miracle is within the grasp of the man humble enough to cast himself into the arms of omnipotence. God is not telling us to strive by our own effort to live the Sermon on the Mount. He points us to the Son, by whom we can know pardon, peace, and the power to live the life.