

Matthew 5:38-48

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[0 : 0 0] The Sermon on the Mount is a call that is directed to the disciples of Jesus, those who followed Him as He lived and walked on this earth, and a call that is also to extend it to us as His disciples today.

And it is a call or demand to what we might call surpassing righteousness. In verse 20 of chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel at the heart of this sermon, we read, For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

And this call, this demand to surpassing or greater righteousness, a righteousness that surpasses anything the world or mere religious compliance can ever deliver.

And the sermon applies this call or demand to different areas of morality and conduct and lifestyle. And one area addressed is the matter of the attitude and behavior we should have towards our enemies, or those that hate us.

And of course, this call is directed to disciples of Jesus Christ. So, what is our attitude as disciples of Jesus Christ? That is the particular context within which this call is made.

[1 : 5 0] And this matter is addressed from verse 38 through to the end of chapter 5. It's not only addressed there. We could draw out teaching on the matter from other parts of the sermon, but very particularly addressed in this section.

And in this section from verse 38 to the end of the chapter, we have set out what we might identify as two parallel and connected duties in this matter of how we are to respond to those who would oppose us.

The first duty that is spoken of and described particularly in the first few verses, from verse 38 through to verse 42, is the duty of passive non-retaliation.

We had to summarize it. As we are being opposed, as harm is done to us, we are not to retaliate when that is our experience. That's one of the duties.

But parallel to that and together with that, there is also a call to active love. So, what Jesus is saying is it's not simply sufficient not to retaliate.

[3 : 0 2] We're not to retaliate. We're to turn the other cheek. But that's not all that we are to do. As well as not retaliating, as well as being passive, we also need to be active and we need to actively love those who oppose us.

Of course, we saw that in the example of Jesus this morning. He was silent in the face of the taunting and the jeering and the mockery. He was passive, if you wish, in the face of such hostility.

But that's not all that he was. He actively prayed for those who were insulting and mocking him.

And here in his teaching, we find that his conduct on the cross reflects what he has already taught here his disciples. So, these two parallel duties of passive non-retaliation, but also this call to active love that addressed particularly from verse 43 to the end of the chapter.

And it's that particularly that we want to concentrate our attention on this evening. This second duty concerning a call to active love.

[4 : 20] Everything that the passage says from verse 43 through to the end of the chapter revolves around love, and particularly the love of the Father. Now, as we consider these verses, we'll play around a little with the order of the material in the passage as it's recorded here for us.

But hopefully, even though we'll play around a little bit with the order, we'll deal with or at least touch on all that Jesus says. And the manner we're going to do it is by dividing what we have to say under the following headings.

First of all, we'll notice what the passage says concerning the love of the Father. We begin there because that really is where it all begins in this duty that we are called to perform.

It begins, the root of the matter is the love of the Father. So, we'll begin there seeing what Jesus says on that matter, the love of the Father. But then we'll move on to consider the love of the Father reflected in his children.

Because this is the logic, the dynamic that Jesus presents. That if we are sons and daughters of the Father, then we will reflect that in our conduct, and very particularly in this matter of loving our enemies.

[5 : 33] So, the love of the Father, the love of the Father reflected in his children, and then the love of the Father in action in his children. And there, really what we're going to be trying to do is to see, well, what does loving our enemies actually look like?

It sounds very grand. It's at the heart, really, of what many perceive to be the Christian gospel. That's what Christians do. They love their enemies.

Well, good. That is indeed what we're called to do. But what does that look like? How does that get fleshed out by Jesus? And there, we'll see what he says here in Matthew's gospel.

But we'll also just draw from a parallel passage in Luke's gospel, where there is a little bit more information, a little bit more help, in this matter of how loving our enemies is fleshed out, or what it looks like.

And then finally, we'll notice how this part of the sermon ends with a permanent challenge to love as the Father. So these are the four aspects that we're going to be considering this evening.

[6 : 42] First of all, then, the love of the Father. Now, Jesus speaks of that very explicitly in verse 45. Following on from the call to love your enemies, to pray for those who persecute you, we read, That you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

And then he speaks of our Father in heaven and speaks of how he loves, or gives one example of how he loves.

He causes his Son to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Everything starts with the love of the Father.

Our love for others is not original or self-generated. We are to love as the Father loves. And in order for us to understand something of what that looks like, Jesus gives this illustration, or more than an illustration, this example or evidence of the Father's love, as he causes his Son to shine on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Now, what does this illustration or piece of evidence tell us about the Father's love? I think it's very clear that Jesus is concerned with getting across one big truth about the Father's love, and we'll come to that in a moment.

[8 : 04] But I think while we recognize that there's one big truth that Jesus has in mind in speaking of how the Father acts as he does, I think we can legitimately draw out a couple of other, if you wish, secondary truths, important truths, but secondary in terms of Jesus' purposes on this occasion concerning the Father's love from what he says.

Well, what can we say then about the Father's love grounded in these actions of the Father of causing his Son to shine on the evil and the good and to rain on the righteous and the unrighteous?

Well, I think one thing we can say about what it tells us of the Father's love is that his love is a persevering love. He causes his Son to shine. Now, the Son shines every day, despite what those who maybe have the misfortune of living in Glasgow might imagine that it doesn't shine every day, but it really does shine every day.

This is God's persevering love. There isn't a day when the Son does not shine upon us, upon the good and upon the evil. God is faithful in persevering in the demonstration of his love to all.

And this is one evidence or example of that. So, his love is persevering love. His love is also generous love. The sun and the rain are provided that we all might enjoy the fruit of the land.

[9 : 29] We know that the sun and the rain are necessary for the land to produce, the fruit that sustains us. God's provision for our material needs, secured by the sun and the rain, is a generous provision.

So, what Jesus says concerning the manner in which the Father loves, speaks of his persevering love, speaks of his generous love, but Jesus' particular concern, his central concern in describing the actions of the Father, is to demonstrate that the Father's love is indiscriminate.

This is the nub of the matter. The principal point that Jesus is making is that the sun and the rain are provided indiscriminately. God does not cause the sun to shine only on his favorites, only on good people.

He doesn't cause the rain only to fall on those who worship and acknowledge him. No, God loves indiscriminately. He loves everybody. An evidence of his love for everybody is that he provides for everybody in this way, in many other ways.

But this is the example that Jesus chooses to provide, to make his point. Now, when we think of God making his sun shine on all, the rain to fall for all, this aspect of God's loving provision is what is sometimes described in theology as common grace.

[10 : 58] Common in the sense that it is showered on all without exception. And so in this regard and in this manner, Jesus makes this important point and makes it clear to his disciples that their Father in heaven loves everybody indiscriminately, and that is evidenced by this particular example.

No doubt much more evidence could be provided, but none or further evidence is not required for Jesus to make his point. So the love of the Father then, persevering, generous, but very particularly for the purposes of what Jesus is seeking to get across, indiscriminate.

But having noted that, let's move on to the second aspect that we can draw out from this passage on this matter of loving our enemies, and that is the love of the Father reflected in his children.

That also is something that we draw out from verse 45, the command to love your enemies, to pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

It's clear that what Jesus is getting across, what he's seeking to persuade the disciples of, is that the manner in which we will demonstrate that we are indeed sons and daughters of God is by the love that we show.

- [12 : 34] When he says there, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father, he's not suggesting, as it could be understood and misunderstood, that somehow this is a condition to become sons and daughters of God.

In the light of the overall teaching of Scripture, it's clear that that is not what Jesus is saying. A simple reading might suggest that. If you want to be a son of God, then you need to love your enemies.

If you don't love your enemies, then you'll never be a son of God. But that's not what Jesus is saying. He's saying that the manner in which you'll demonstrate that you are sons and daughters of God will be in this way, as you love your enemies.

Why? Because your Father loves his enemies. As you pray for those who persecute you, for that is the attitude of love that the Father has for those who are opposed to him.

Love then, and love for our enemies in particular, is evidence of who we are. Evidence of who we are. Love for our enemies demonstrates the family likeness, and so demonstrates or prove who we are sons of.

- [13 : 41] And this love for our enemies, like the Father's, must be persevering and generous, but very particularly, it must be indiscriminate.

We can't pick and choose who we will love. We are to love all, and in particular, the call to love our enemies. We are to love friends and enemies without distinction.

I think it's worth making the point that that doesn't mean that we are to love friends and enemies alike. The manner in which we love may well be different, and indeed will be different, but the call to love is without distinction.

So love is evidence of who we are. But this love that we reflect as children of our Father will also be evidence of who we are not.

In verses 46 and 47, Jesus makes the point of who we are not to be like. He challenges the disciples in this matter of love and says, well, you know, this love that you're being called to, it's not like the love that you can see others showing.

- [14 : 50] It's not like the love of those who love in order to or because they know they will be loved back. Yes, that's love. Jesus isn't saying that that's necessarily a bad thing, but he's saying that you are being called to something greater than that.

If that's all you are able to demonstrate, then you're not going to show any likeness to your Father. There's going to be no distinction between you and others. If you only greet those who are of your kind, of your clan, then, well, even the pagans do that.

That won't distinguish you. That won't demonstrate that you are sons and daughters of God. The love that you show, this surpassing love, will give evidence of who you are not.

You're not anymore just like the tax collectors or any others for that matter who love in a self-interested way or like the pagans who love their own.

Your love will distinguish you from such. I think it's, I think we've already suggested this, but it's worth just repeating, if indeed we have already suggested it, that Jesus is not saying that it's a bad thing to love those who love you.

- [16 : 07] He's not saying that it's a bad thing to greet those who are your own brothers and of your own kind, if you wish, or of your own clan or of your own circle. But what he's simply saying is that this kind of love by itself falls short of what is demanded of sons and daughters of God.

As our righteousness is to be surpassing righteousness, so our love very especially is to be surpassing or greater love. One writer puts it rather pithily in the following terms, to return evil for good is devilish, to return good for good is human, to return good for evil is divine.

And if we are sons and daughters of God, then that is the standard that is set for us to return good for evil. So the love of the Father reflected in his children, but then thirdly, we can notice the love of the Father in action in his children.

In verses 43 and 44, we're kind of going backwards here, we have some examples, if you wish, of the manner in which this love for our enemies is to be demonstrated, is to be fleshed out.

It's clear that we are to love in the manner that our Father loves. We are to love our enemies. We are to love indiscriminately. But what does that look like? In the passage, we have presented by Jesus a false version of what it looks like, of what the love of God's people should look like.

[17 : 43] The false version is presented there in the very first verse, or first verse of the section in verse 43. You have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. That was the common received wisdom within the religious community that the disciples were part of.

And Jesus is saying, well, that's what you've heard, but that is not right. That is a false version. The Jews had concocted an ethic of love that they claimed was grounded in the Scriptures.

But that ethic that they had concocted twisted and perverted what God demands of His people. And the formula that they had come up with was this one that we have recorded there.

Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. Now, the language that they employ echoes the language of Scripture. And very particularly in the Old Testament in Leviticus chapter 19 in verse 18, you have this call to love your neighbor.

We can just very quickly notice that verse. We'll look at another verse in this chapter in this connection also. But we read the whole verse in Leviticus 19 in verse 18, do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.

[19 : 01] I am the Lord. And so this formula that the religious teachers had concocted echoes in a measure the language of Scripture. But you'll notice there's an omission and there's an addition.

They rather conveniently omit the words as yourself, love your neighbor as yourself. They reduce it to love your neighbor, a lot less demanding. But not only is there an omission, more seriously there is this addition.

Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. Now, where did that come from? How did they come up with this additional element to their ethic of love if you wish?

Well, it's not in the chapter in Leviticus from where they seem to be drawing their teaching. And it would seem that the logic of the Jewish teachers was as follows.

They took the view, well, my neighbor must be my fellow Jew. And they would seem to have some reason for coming to that conclusion. Even the chapter in Leviticus certainly seems to be focusing particularly, though not exclusively, on how they are to deal with their fellow Israelites.

[20 : 09] And so the Jewish teacher said, well, that's fine. Love my neighbor. My neighbor are Jews, so I need to love Jews. Now, if it's my neighbor I need to love, then I don't need to love those who are not my neighbors.

And they took that to be Gentiles. They're not my neighbors. So I don't need to love them. And then as they continued in their rather perverse logic, they said, well, if I don't love them, then what do I do with them?

Well, I hate them. And hey, presto, they have this ethic that they concommit. Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

Their logic, if indeed we can grace it with that description, could be challenged on so many levels. But suffice it to say that in the very same chapter that they would draw certainly part of their ethic from, we read as follows in Leviticus chapter 19 and verse 34.

Listen to what God says here. The alien or the foreigner living with you must be treated as one of your native born. Love him. Very explicitly, the alien, the foreigner, the Gentile.

[21 : 18] Love him as yourself. For you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. So you have this false version. We don't want to spend time considering a false version, but Jesus himself draws it to the attention of the disciples because no doubt they had been influenced by this perspective that they thought was grounded in the Bible.

Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. And Jesus said, no, that's not the case. That is not, and has never been what God has demanded of his people. Rather, he presents what we might call the genuine article of how we are to love our enemies.

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Here we have fleshed out. Here we have concrete examples of how we are to love our enemies.

The one that Matthew highlights is that we are to pray for those who persecute you. We are to pray for our enemies. Now we'll turn in a moment to see what Luke tells us where he draws in teaching that Jesus evidently also gave but that Matthew has chosen not to record and that is not only to pray for our enemies but to bless them and to do good to them.

We'll come to that in a moment. But if we begin with the example that Matthew records and that is that we love our enemies by praying for them. Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was writing not as an armchair theologian but as one who knew a great deal about what it was to have and to suffer at the hands of enemies because of his faith.

[23 : 02] He describes this requirement to pray for our enemies as the supreme command. This is the supreme command. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side and plead for him to God.

And notice also as we think about or think a little bit about this matter of praying for our enemies. Praying for our enemies is not only an expression of our love, it most certainly is that, but I think it's also the means to increase our love.

It can be very difficult to pray for our enemies but if in loyalty to God and in obedience to God we do that even though we find it difficult, even though our natural inclination is to do otherwise, as we pray for our enemies in that we are loving them but in doing so God will enable us to love them, will help us to do that which we find so difficult to do.

It's very difficult to pray for somebody, to pray for their good, to pray that God would bless them and in parallel to have hatred for them in our hearts.

So difficult for these things to go together and rightly so that it should be difficult. So we are to pray. That's one way in which this love for our enemies is to be seen in action as we pray for them.

[24 : 25] But as I've already commented, there are other ways in which we can do so that Luke records for us from Jesus' teaching. Let's just quickly read what Luke says in chapter 6 of his gospel.

Luke chapter 6 and verses 27 and 28. But I tell you who hear me, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.

Here we have this triad of duties that evidence our love for our enemies or that give expression, that flesh out love for our enemies.

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you, do good to those who hate you. We've already commented on the call to pray for our enemies, but we're also to bless our enemies.

They insult us, they speak ill of us, but we, as opportunity affords, be it directly to them or as we speak about them, we are to speak graciously to and of them.

[25 : 39] As we pray for them, we ask God that he would bless and prosper them. So we pray for them, we bless them, but then also, Luke tells us that Jesus' call extends to doing good for those who hate you.

True love or Christian love or love that reflects the Father's love is not sentiment so much as service. Now, you might struggle and I certainly would struggle and indeed with good reason we would struggle to like our enemies.

And I don't think we're actually called to like our enemies, but we are called to love our enemies. And that is where it's so important for us to grasp that love is much more a matter of service to rather than any sentiment about.

We may not have a sentiment of affection for somebody who opposes us and does us harm and damage, but we can love them as we seek to serve them and to do good to them.

So love is fleshed out if you wish as we pray for, as we bless, and as we do good to our enemies. And that just leads me to the final thing that I want to comment from what Jesus teaches here in the verses we're looking at.

[26 : 58] And we're introducing it or describing it as the permanent challenge to love as the Father. So we've thought briefly of the love of the Father, the love of the Father reflected in His children, the love of the Father in action in His children, but now finally the permanent challenge to love as the Father.

The final verse, verse 48, constitutes what I'm calling this permanent challenge. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Now this call to be perfect, it must be necessarily connected to the call to love. And so the call is to be understood not so much as a call to model perfection, though we are, as believers, called to such model perfection.

But on this occasion, I think the emphasis in the call particularly is concerned with love, this call to perfect love, to love as the Father loves, to love in the way that Jesus outlines here and as we've seen also in Luke's gospel.

And I say this as a permanent challenge because we always fall short. Jesus does not speak of perfection because He anticipated that His disciples would, in this life, secure such perfection.

[28 : 22] It's clear that He does not anticipate that because in the very same sermon, He urges them to pray permanently and constantly for forgiveness. Now, if He anticipated that they would achieve perfection, then, well, there would be no need to pray for forgiveness.

Jesus is clear that they won't achieve perfection, and yet the challenge is to this perfect love, to love as the Father loves.

If they are to love as the Father loves, then it could be described in no other way as perfect love. For the Father's love is perfect. It is a permanent challenge to us as disciples of Jesus, a daily call to show and demonstrate perfect love as we love without distinction, as we love our enemies.

It's also a permanent challenge to God's people in every age, but a particular challenge in the face of persecution. I mentioned Bonhoeffer a moment ago, and Bonhoeffer wrote on this matter before the outbreak of war and his own imprisonment.

Whether he anticipated that, that may well have been the outcome, I don't know, but certainly what he writes was before he actually suffered in that way. And as he wrote about this matter, he quoted another writer, a writer by the name of Vilmar, who had written in the 19th century on this same matter.

[30 : 01] But he quotes him with almost prophetic discernment, given what he would endure and other believers would endure. But I think it also serves as an opinion or a challenge for us as we look to what may be our experience and our future as believers even in our own land.

And listen to what Bonhoeffer quotes. These aren't his own words. He's quoting another on this matter, on this commandment to love our enemies. Let me just read it. It's a somewhat longer quote than I would normally read, but bear with me.

This commandment that we should love our enemies and forgo revenge will grow even more urgent in the holy struggle that lies before us.

Christians will be hounded from place to place, subjected to physical assault, maltreatment, and death of every kind. We are approaching an age of widespread persecution. Soon the time will come when we shall pray.

It will be a prayer of earnest love for those very sons of perdition who stand around and gaze at us with eyes of flame with hatred and who have perhaps already raised their hands to kill us.

[31 : 14] Yes, the church which is waiting for the Lord and which discerns the signs of the times must fling itself with its utmost power and with the panoply of its holy life into this prayer of love.

It is a permanent challenge. It is a challenge that is relevant in any age, whatever our circumstances, however much freedom and security and protection we enjoy. But I think it is a particular challenge in the face of persecution and in the face of impending more difficult times for us.

I wonder, do we see the storm clouds coming and are we ready for the storm that approaches? But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we ask that you would indeed help us how we stand in need of your help in this matter. We readily acknowledge that it is no easy thing for us to love our enemies, no easy thing for us to bless them and to pray for them.

And so we do ask that you would help us, that by your Spirit you would help us so to love, that we would indeed in this way demonstrate whose we are and whom we serve, that we would demonstrate the family likeness that we would love as the Father loves.

[32 : 49] The Father who sends His Son on the righteous and the unrighteous, who sends rain on those who are good and those who are evil. Help us so to love.

Help us that as we so love, so we would indeed to those who would look on and demonstrate who we are and that indeed in that way we would draw even those who would oppose us to the one we serve and the one whose sons and daughters we are.

And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.