March 20, 2016

“Loving Our Enemies”

Matthew 5:43-48

**FCF**: Our natural hate for our enemies

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Christ came to fulfill the Law.

(magnet) We must then heed His teaching – including on loving our enemies.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

In 1987 Walt Everett’s 24-year-old son, Scott, was shot and killed. For months, Walt’s emotions alternated between rage and depression. He struggled just to go through the motions of his work as a pastor. Then, at the sentencing of Mike Carlucci, the man who murdered his son, Walt heard expressions of remorse and felt, in that moment, God nudging him to forgive.

Walt wrote to Mike on the first anniversary of Scott’s death. That led to correspondence. Which led to visits. Which led to Walt’s testifying on Mike’s behalf at his parole hearing. Based on Walt’s testimony, Mike obtained an early release. The two men have since grown in their friendship and now speak together to groups about the healing power of forgiveness.

That’s hard to get our minds around – not just because of the pain of that father but his response to his pain. It’s completely unnatural. And we desperately need to talk about it.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 5:43-48

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

In October 2006, Charles Roberts walked into a schoolhouse in the Amish community of Lancaster, PA, shot 10 schoolgirls, killing 5, and then killed himself. That night, members of a grieving community went to the home of his parents and asked them not to move away. Days later, there were more Amish than non-Amish present at Roberts’ funeral. His parents were then asked to attend the funerals of the other slain. And were quickly embraced by other mourning parents. But the story doesn’t end there. The Amish of Lancaster have taken up collections for Roberts’ widow and children. And the family of one wounded girl, now 13, has opened their home to Roberts’ mother that she might have the chance to care for that girl every Thursday.

Jesus declared He has come to fulfill the Law (READ Matthew 5:17). This means that He is the answer to every Old Testament prophecy. He is the end of all the sacrifices. He is the meaning to all the pivotal events and persons in Israel’s history. And, with His teaching, He gives the true purpose and intent of all God’s commands. He truly is the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ, a greater King more worthy of praise than anyone knew on that first Palm Sunday.

We must then heed Him. We must heed what He says on whatever He teaches – including His call for us to love our enemies. Hard as that may be, we need to heed Him.

To get at this, we need to look at three things. First, the command itself. Second, the correction Jesus gives regarding the command. And, third, some needed cautions to consider.

1. **THE COMMAND**

First, the command. What is it that Jesus is addressing? (READ Matthew 5:43)

1. *What Had Been Said*

Jesus is about to make a distinction between what had been said and how this was read.

1. Commanded in the Old Testament

Partly, this comes from Leviticus 19 (READ Leviticus 19:18). Throughout the Old Testament, we hear such calls to care for the stranger, the alien, the outcast, just as God had cared for Israel.

1. Carried over to the New Testament

So this was commanded in the Old Testament. And then carried over into the New Testament. Think of Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. Or His practice of caring for the outcasts of His day – women, children, lepers, prostitutes, “tax collectors and sinners”.

1. *How It Was Read*

So the first part was fine. But the second part is found nowhere in the Old Testament. You see, this wasn’t a quotation or a summation of prior teaching. It was an outright perversion.

1. Crass omission

Note the crass omission. In this revised version current at the time, there was no mention of “as you love yourself”. Which, of course, narrows what should be the standard of our love.

1. Brazen addition

And then note the brazen addition. Now we have “and hate your enemy”. Which then narrows who should be the objects of our love, conveniently qualifying the category of our neighbor.

You see, the command had been clear. But it had been covered over and obscured.

*Illustration:*

Imagine you’re working with a weight trainer. He adds weight to your reps, increasing the strain and fatigue. Which tempts you to cheat, to bend and twist and turn, to try and get out from under the weight but to do so in a way that has you still going through the motions.

That’s what you see here. This is the sixth of the six contrasts Jesus makes here between the true meaning and the conveyed meaning of the Law. And it’s the worst of these contortions.

*Application:*

For it’s the hardest to hear. You see, this is not like the one we looked at last week, non-retaliation. This is an active love. This is not just kindness to one who has hurt us by accident, ignorance, or neglect. This is looking to the good of someone who is out to get us. That’s hard.

But Christ came to fulfill the Law. We need to heed His teaching on loving our enemies.

1. **THE CORRECTION**

So, in view of all that, Jesus has to press into this and to bring some correction.

1. *Needed Clarifications*

But let me start with a few clarifications to clear the air of any misconceptions.

1. Strained assumption

Let’s start with a strained assumption. Some might say, “*Well, we are to love our neighbor. That must mean we are to hate our enemy*.” No, that’s like a child saying, “*Mom said to do my homework. That must mean she wants me to skip my chores*.” Do you see? That’s pretty thin.

1. Old Testament history

The claim is also made that the hatred is justified because of Old Testament history and Israelite wars with the Canaanites. But the fact is that those nations were among the most corrupt and depraved of the ancient world. And those wars were by the command of God – for His purposes in establishing a nation to prepare the way for the Savior. So that claim is pretty thin too.

1. Imprecatory psalms

Others will say that this hate is justified because of the strong language we see in some of the psalms. But we need to understand that the psalmist was never speaking as an individual taking personal offense but as the representative of God and His people, standing in opposition to the enemies of God and His people, longing for God’s purposes to be accomplished. So again, thin.

The fact is that this double-sided desire for love and justice is a natural response to serving a loving and just God. We should call evil for what it is. And long for people to repent and come to faith. And yet also for God to restrain all evil-doing and to bring needed justice.

1. *Clear Intensification*

Such then are the clarifications. Now let’s look at the clear intensification Jesus gives.

1. The demand

First, the demand (READ Matthew 5:43-44). We are to love our enemies. Jesus’ audience knew what it was to have enemies – both near and far. And to love them did not mean nice sentiment but real action. And not just action but real affection. The whole person reaching out in love.

Most especially in prayer. Not just speaking well of them to them but to God. Why? Such prayer is not just a means of expressing our love for someone. It is also a means of increasing our love for someone. For it is impossible to continue in prayer and still hold onto hatred.

1. The rationale

That’s the demand. What of the rationale? (READ Matthew 5:44-45) We are to show ourselves to be like our Father, modeling His indiscriminate love to all through common grace. But Jesus goes on (READ Matthew 5:46-48). In showing such love, we show ourselves to be like our Father and unlike our enemies. Unlike the tax collectors, the cheats and traitors of the time, and their love conditioned on how you treated them. Unlike the Gentiles, ignorant of God and His ways, and their love conditioned on who you were. That’s an excluding and discriminating love.

“*Not so with you*,” Jesus says. “*As my followers, as citizens of my kingdom, yours is to be a perfect love – whole, complete, arms open wide even to enemies. Just as with your Father.*”

*Illustration:*

Note the picture on the screen. This is the moment when Pope John Paul II met with Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who tried to kill him in 1981. This picture was taken 2 years after the assassination attempt and it shows Pope John Paul II meeting with Ali Agca in prison. The two men began a friendship that lasted for many years. In fact, the Pope also met with Ali Agca’s family. And when the Pope was ill near the end of his life, Ali Agca and his family sent him a letter saying that they were grieving and that the Pope had become a great friend to them.

*Application:*

So, let me ask you. Who comes to mind? Don’t be nice. Be honest. It may well not be someone who tried to physically kill you. But they meant to do you some kind of harm. Perhaps it’s someone stubbornly immoveable, utterly unresponsive to your efforts to be kind. Perhaps they have forgiven you of nothing even as you have tried to forgive them of everything. Perhaps they have returned your compassion with hatred and your service with mockery. Who is it?

It’s hard. And it’s tempting to try to get out from under it. You want to shift the weight, to go through the motions, to turn a deaf ear to the trainer. And to pretend that you know better.

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1. **THE CAUTIONS**

Which brings me to this last thing, to these simple and very brief cautions.

1. *Understating*

The first is the danger of understating, of downplaying, and making light of things.

1. What Jesus is saying here

Of understating what Jesus is saying here. We can’t do that. This is not a case of hyperbole.

1. How very hard this is

We can’t understate what Jesus is saying. Or how very hard this is. It’s impossible for us.

1. *Overstating*

So the first danger is understating. The second is overstating, of making too much.

1. Our ability to do this

Of our ability to do this. Of our tenacity, strength, fortitude, or determination. For we can’t.

1. Our desire to do this

We have no ability here. Or desire. We can’t do this. And we don’t really want to do this.

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**CONCLUSION:**

So how does all this fit into Palm Sunday? I’m glad you asked. Let me set the stage. It is the Passover and Jerusalem is swelling with people. Word is spreading about this amazing rabbi from Galilee. And opposition to Him from the religious elite is rising. Into this, Jesus comes riding down the Mount of Olives on a donkey – just as the prophet Zechariah had said centuries before. The crowds pick up on this, wave the palm branches, began their shouts of “Hosanna!” And Jesus does nothing to discourage them. Which, of course, brings the tension to a boil and eventually draws the Romans into the picture. Palm Sunday will lead to Good Friday.

Now every indication is that Jesus knew exactly what He was doing here. He was no helpless pawn. He came as a ransom – to live the life we should have lived and to die the death we deserved to die. He came as a ransom for people who were not His friends but for us, for those the Bible describes as being God’s enemies. Do you see? Jesus came to do the very thing for us that He’s calling us to do. And at an immeasurably greater cost than we can ever imagine.

This then becomes the model for us, the pattern of what this looks like and how we should love. And it becomes the motive for love as well, the reason we would choose to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. For if Jesus has done this for us, how then can we not do the same for others in His name? So here we have the model and the motive. And the power. For as this good news makes its way into our hearts, it changes us. As His Spirit does His work within our hearts, we find a new desire and a new power to love as we’ve been loved.

So, you see, there is very much a connection between this teaching and the events of Palm Sunday. Christ came to fulfill the Law. Let us heed His teaching on loving our enemies.

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