

The King's Sermon

Getting to the Heart of Hostility (Matthew 5:43-48)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on July 2, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ As we've been going through this series on the Sermon on the Mount, a number of you have expressed your appreciation. You appreciate studying this Sermon. And I appreciate you telling me that. But to be honest, I haven't always enjoyed it. And I seriously wonder if you have. ***Can any serious reader of the Sermon on the Mount actually enjoy it?***
 - ▶ C.S. Lewis would answer 'no'. In writing a rejoinder to a scholar who publicly criticized him in a magazine journal, Lewis addressed the accusation that he didn't seem to care much for Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and its ethic. To that Lewis replied, "*As to "caring for" the Sermon on the Mount, if "caring for" here means "liking" or enjoying, I suppose no one "cares for" it. Who can like being knocked flat on his face by a sledge hammer? I can hardly imagine a more deadly spiritual condition than that of a man who can read that passage with tranquil pleasure.*"¹

- ❖ I love that imagery. **When Lewis read the Sermon on the Mount, it felt to him like a sledge hammer, knocking him around, passage and after passage, flattening him on his face.** I wonder if you've felt the same. When we studied the Beatitudes, we were bombarded one after another with humbling verses that caused us to self-reflect and even question the genuineness of our own faith – of whether or not ours is the kingdom of heaven.
 - ▶ Then we were forced to wrestle with whether our Christian witness is salty enough and whether it's shining enough gospel light into the world. And then we were confronted with chapter 5:20, which says we won't enter the kingdom of heaven unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. And that crushing verse was followed up with six illustrations of what that righteousness looks like. **And each of them hit harder and harder, until we get to today's passage – the six and final illustration – which feels like a knock-out punch.** "*44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you 48You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*"

- ❖ If you can read those words, then close your Bible and smile with 'tranquil pleasure' and think, "Wow, what a great teacher. I really respect Jesus's ethical teaching." – **if you're not flattened by his words, then I think you weren't really listening.** I wholeheartedly agree with Lewis when he says it's foolish to read Jesus's Sermon and conclude that he's just a great moral teacher. No, he's doing far more than offering us ethical teaching.
 - ▶ He's more like a King commanding his subjects. Or if you prefer, like a Father instructing his children. **Either way, it's not a situation where you can sift through his teaching to pick and choose which verses to apply to your life.** Later in chapter 7:21, he identifies himself as the Lord of the kingdom of heaven and warns that only those who do the will of his Father will be allowed to enter.

¹ C.S. Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger", in *God in the Dock*.

- ❖ If that's not a sledge hammer to the face, then I don't know what is. Are you reading this Sermon rightly? Are you taking Jesus's words seriously? **If you are, then you shouldn't enjoy reading the Sermon on the Mount. In the same way you shouldn't enjoy receiving chemotherapy. It certainly isn't fun, but it could very well save your life.** I don't know about you, but I'll take life-giving over enjoyable any day.
 - ▶ So as we consider today's passage, prepare to be flattened. It's going to hurt a bit. But it's a good pain. Like when you work out and you feel that good pain. You know it's worth it because something's happening. You're growing. You're maturing. You're hopefully becoming more like your heavenly Father.
 - I want to consider four commands in our passage. 1) Reject hate for your enemies. 2) Choose love for your enemies. 3) Imitate your Father in heaven. 4) Surpass the world in righteousness.

Reject Hate For Your Enemies

- ❖ Let's begin by rejecting any hate for our enemies. This is what Jesus does starting in v43. We've noted before how, in this section, Jesus has been challenging the scribes and Pharisees and their interpretation of the Mosaic Law. He's been using the same formula in the other five illustrations where he starts by quoting what they've heard being taught and then follows up with his interpretation, which is truer to the heart of God's law. **He thereby demonstrates how the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees is a distortion of the OT.**
 - ▶ It's pretty clear in our passage when he quotes what they've heard being said, "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'*"
- ❖ Now the first half of that does come from the Law. It first shows up in Leviticus 19:18, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*". Jesus quotes it again later in chapter 22:39 when he's asked about the greatest commandment in the law. So that's well established.
 - ▶ **But the second half of that teaching, "hate your enemy", is nowhere to be found.** That's not a quote from the OT. That's a quote from the scribes and Pharisees. In their attempt to interpret Moses, they unfortunately distorted him instead.
- ❖ The problem with the scribes and Pharisees is they were always trying to clarify the law, to narrow its focus, to make obedience more feasible. But in so doing, they inevitably lowered the standard and watered down the law.
 - ▶ **Notice in this case how they lowered the OT standard of neighborly love by leaving out the key phrase "as yourself".** It's not that hard or sacrificial to love your neighbor if self-love still comes first. I'll be kind and loving towards you as long as it somehow serves my self-interest. I can do that. But if you're asking me to love my neighbor as much as (or even more) than myself – that feels humanly impossible.
- ❖ **But not only did the scribes and Pharisees lower the standard, they narrowed the object of our neighborly love by leaving out enemies.** The category of 'neighbor' only included "good" people; people they like; people who liked them; people who looked like them, talked like them, thought like them. Their neighbor simply became their fellow Israelites.

- ❖ Let me show you how I think they misinterpreted. Turn to **Leviticus 19:17-18**, “¹⁷*You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*”

 - ▶ **It’s likely they took the phrase “your brother” and “the sons of your own people” and assumed they were synonymous with “neighbor”.** That’s probably how they interpreted ‘neighbor’ as another way of saying ‘Israelite’, and in their minds, it gave permission to hate Samaritans and Gentiles. This, of course, was the same category mistake that Jesus had to confront when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk. 10:29-37).*

- ❖ *Who is my neighbor? To whom am I obligated to show loving kindness? **By even asking, we’re trying to establish limits to the definition of ‘neighbor’.*** We want it more narrowly drawn to exclude the ‘stranger’ and the ‘enemy’. It’s unreasonable (we tell ourselves) for God to expect us to love *those* people as I love my own people – as I love myself.
 - ▶ **But do you see, how this mentality is what feeds our sinful prejudices and can be used to justify hate for certain groups of people?** This kind of rationalization is what undergirds a sinful form of nationalism that looks with suspicion upon the foreigner, the immigrant, the ‘other’. And even looks down on them with a sense of superiority. This kind of evil thinking is sadly being justified in our society today.

- ❖ Again, the problem is a gross category mistake. According to Jesus – who is teaching according to Moses – **there is no category in the OT for a non-neighbor.** There is no non-neighbor – a set of people for whom the law of neighborly love doesn’t apply. **To imagine that there are some people you don’t have to love – that you can justifiably hate – is categorically wrong.** And there’s no way you can use Scripture to back that up.
 - ▶ Even the way the scribes and Pharisees used Leviticus 19 is an example of bad exegesis. Sure, they were trying to read “love your neighbor” in context – but they didn’t read enough of the context. In that same chapter, you’ve got a clear mention of the ‘sojourner’ and the ‘stranger’ as objects of your neighborly love (cf. Lev. 19:10, 34). Let me read to you **Leviticus 19:34**, “*You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*”

- ❖ Did you hear that? The LORD is saying there is no such thing as a non-neighbor. **Loving your neighbor as yourself includes loving the stranger as yourself (and by extension your enemy).** And why is that? Did you hear God’s logic?
 - ▶ You shall love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers. You were once strangers to the loving kindness of God. You were once his enemies and rightful objects of his wrath. But in the land of Egypt, God set his mercy on you and let his wrath pass over. **So if the LORD your God so treated you when you were strangers and enemies, how then can you treat strangers and enemies with anything less than the same kind of love?**

- ❖ That's the beautiful logic of Scripture. What the scribes and Pharisees have done is twist it. **They've found a way to justify their hate for people who aren't like them or people they simply don't like.**
 - ▶ Friends, there is such thing as a healthy sense of patriotism, and there's a place for a deep love and appreciation of your cultural heritage. But we have to resist an ethnocentric tribalism and to reject any attempt to limit our neighborly love and to justify our hate for the 'other'.

Choose Love For Your Enemies

- ❖ In contrast, we are to choose love – to choose to love the 'other' even if it's an enemy. This is our second point. Last week's passage gave a command put in the negative – do not resist the one who is evil. Do not retaliate against your enemy. The focus was on renouncing our self-centered preoccupation with fairness.
 - ▶ **But in today's text, Jesus goes further and focuses on replacing self-centered desires to always be treated fairly with a self-giving desire to love regardless of how we're treated.** Look at v44, "*44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*"
- ❖ **This is where critics will question the practicality of this Sermon.** It sounds ideal. But it's idealistic and impossible. Do you really think it's possible to love the wicked man who intentionally drives a car into crowds of bystanders in order to inflict carnage, death, and terror? Does Jesus really expect the victim of abuse or sexual assault to actually love her attacker? Does Jesus want family members of those who have fallen victim to gun violence to really love their loved one's killer?
 - ▶ We might be able to understand a command to not seek 'an eye for an eye', to not take vengeance into our own hands, but it seems cruel to expect victims to go further and actually love the one who inflicts such harm on them.
- ❖ **This is where we have to understand the kind of love Jesus is talking about.** Many of you may be aware that in the Greek there are various words that all translate to 'love' in English, but there are nuanced differences between them.
 - ▶ The word *storge* refers to the love of family, typically of parental affection for one's own children. The word *eros* is the love of beauty, the love you feel for someone in a romantic sense. And the word *philia* is a love of mutual respect shared between friends. It's the camaraderie, the brotherly love, you feel among your friends.
- ❖ But then there's the word found here, *agape*. **Agape is different in that it is a love born of decision.** It's not a love ignited by the loveliness of the other person. It's not a love that responds to the worthiness of another. It's a choice.
 - ▶ That's why it's different. **You can't command the other loves. You either feel them or you don't.** The kind of love you naturally have for your child, your spouse, your best friend is not something you choose to feel. You just feel *storge*, *eros*, *philia* – or you don't. **You can't command those loves, but you can command *agape*.**

- ❖ *Agape* is a volitional love where you choose to love someone *before* you feel the love. **It's the will to will the goodwill of others even if they don't deserve it.**² So to love your enemy doesn't mean you condone their behavior. It doesn't mean you like their personality, beliefs, lifestyle, or choices. But it does mean you treat them like you do.
- ❖ Now of course, we can't just stay there. If our love for the enemy simply amounts to a choice to treat them kindly while on the inside we seethe and boil with hate and bitterness, then we're missing the point. How you feel in the heart still matters.
 - ▶ **But *agape* love is special in that you don't have to wait until you feel love for a person before you choose to obey the command to love that person.** And what you'll discover is that, when make that choice to love, something changes in you.
- ❖ God's Word is living and active. **It does more than just inform – it performs. It does something in you through the power of the Holy Spirit.** When you submit to God's Word and choose obedience, God's Spirit molds your heart and align it to his. **So not only do you will what he wills but you begin to feel as he feels towards undeserving sinners.**
 - ▶ Listen to what **C.S. Lewis** has to say about it in *Mere Christianity*. *“The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste your time bothering whether you “love” your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.... The difference between a Christian and worldly man is ... The worldly man treats certain people kindly because he “likes” them; the Christian, trying to treat every one kindly, finds himself liking more and more people as he goes on—including people he could not even have imagined himself liking at the beginning.”*³
- ❖ **Have you ever prayed for your enemy?** Jesus tells us to pray for those who persecute you. Of course that involves a choice. You choose to pray for your enemy. And if you do so, you'll soon discover he's no longer your enemy. I like what **William Barclay** has to say about this verse. He says, **“We cannot go on hating another man in the presence of God. The surest way of killing bitterness is to pray for the man we are tempted to hate.”**
- ❖ Do you have an enemy in your life right now? Someone who purposely wronged you. Someone who intentionally hurt you. Someone who's maligning you or persecuting you. **You don't have to trust them. You don't have to respect them. You don't even have to like them. But you are to love them.** And the way you start is by bringing that person and his or her needs into the presence of God through prayer in Jesus's name. That's a fundamental way of *choosing* to love your enemies.

² I attribute that phrase to Professor Darrell Johnson in his lectures on the Sermon on the Mount when I studied at Regent College.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book III: Christian Behavior, Chapter 9: Charity.

Imitate Your Father in Heaven

- ❖ But I realize this still seems impossible. To a civilized man, it's already asking a lot to tell him not to retaliate against his enemy. But now you want him to love that same enemy? **That's asking too much. For a civilized man that is too much. But not for a gospel-ized man.** Not for the man or woman who has been covered by the blood of the Savior and born again by the power of the Spirit.
 - ▶ **If you are a child of God, then you can do as your Father in heaven does.** That's Jesus's point in v45. Love your enemies. Pray for them. *“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.”* This leads to the third command in our passage is calling us to imitate our Father in heaven.

- ❖ Now he's not saying if you manage to love your enemies, you get to be a part of God's family and have him as Father. No, that's a works-based interpretation that wouldn't fit with the rest of the Gospel. **I think Jesus means if you're a child of God, then the family resemblance is going to show.** You'll love as your heavenly Father loves.
 - ▶ And what does it mean to love as the Father loves? **It means your treatment of others is no longer governed by their behavior, by how they treat you.** It's based instead on the freeness of grace.
 - That's what Jesus meant when he spoke of the sun rising on the evil and the good and the rain falling on the just and the unjust. The wicked are wicked and God doesn't ignore that. His justice will still be done. But before that day comes, he gives sun and rain to the wicked, causing their crops to grow as much as the righteous – sometimes even more.

- ❖ That's an example of the common grace that God shows to all. Which he expresses in a love that he indiscriminately shows to both the good and the bad. We're not talking about the kind of particular redemptive love for his Bride the Church. **Here we're talking about a general providential love he has for all mankind – even the worst among us.** Because we're talking about a love that's not governed by who *we* are and what *we* do – but by who *God* is and what he freely chooses to do.

- ❖ **Friends, the only way to love your enemies like God the Father is to be freed from your obsessive preoccupation with the self.** Think about all the rude, unkind, or even hateful thoughts you had this week. What caused them? Was it not what other people said to you, what they did to you, what they think about you? It's easy to put the blame on them, but it's really about you. You reacted that way because you're so focused on *you*. **This is one of the sad results of the Fall, we're so easily governed by the words, actions, and opinions of others because we're so wrapped up in ourselves.**
 - ▶ That's why we need Jesus and his gospel to free us from a bondage to the self. Through his life and death and life again, Jesus reconciles us to the Father. He secures for us the Father's love, his acceptance, his approval. That's so liberating!

- ❖ Think if you had to give a presentation at work or in class. Imagine if your boss or teacher has already reviewed your work and privately informed you that you've aced it. You've closed the deal. You've scored an A. You've got the acceptance and approval from the one who matters most. **Secure with that knowledge, you can endure the harshest of criticism from your enemies.** No matter what they say, no matter how rude or mean-spirited they can be, you can love them and pray for their success because you're not wrapped up anymore with trying to secure things for yourself.
 - ▶ If you're secure in the love of the One who matters most in all the universe, if you're confident you have his approval because you have his Son as Lord and Savior, then **the way you treat people no longer has to be governed by how they treat you.** By whether they're good or evil, just or unjust. Now you can treat them on the basis of the freeness of grace. That's the only way you can love your enemies.

Surpass the World in Righteousness

- ❖ Brothers and sisters, this is how we demonstrate to the world whose children we are. **When we love even our enemies, we exhibit that unique *agape* love that's only found in the Father and in his sons and daughters.** And Lord-willing our enemies will see our love – they'll see our good works – and give glory to our Father in heaven (Mt. 5:16).
 - ▶ This leads to our last point. This section of the Sermon began with an exhortation to surpass the world in righteousness, and it ends in the same way. Look back at v46, *“⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁸And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”*
- ❖ **What more are you doing?** That's a sobering question. A question you don't want to hear coming from Jesus. That's why we should be asking it to ourselves now. What more am I doing than someone who hasn't experienced the new birth, who's not covered by the perfect righteousness of the Savior, who doesn't have the Spirit of the Living God inside them?
- ❖ **If you only love the lovable or only those who love you back, what credit is that to you? Even unregenerate, unrepentant, unsaved humanity does that.** The Bible teaches that all mankind is born totally depraved, but that doctrine doesn't suggest that fallen man is incapable of doing anything good. It's just that any good we do is still tainted with traces of evil. But even the worst of sinners are still capable of loving family, friends, countrymen, etc.
 - ▶ **To Jesus's audience, there was no more wicked a class of people than tax collectors.** Tax collectors betrayed their own people to line their own pockets. You would think they'd be incapable of love and yet they do love – their own kind.
- ❖ **If you think about it, to love those who love you is just the positive version of *lex talionis*.** Instead of 'I'll hurt you if you hurt me', it's 'I'll love you if you love me'. I'll do good to you if you do good to me. I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine. That's the ethic of civilized society. But Church, we are a gospel-ized people. More is expected of us.

- ❖ So Christian, what more are you doing than others? **It's not enough to resemble a civilized person who's generally nice to everyone.** To many people in the world (and even in the church) that's their impression of what a Christian is. A Christian is a nice, moral person. But of course there are lots of nice, moral people out there who reject Jesus as the Son of God and the only Savior of the world.
 - ▶ **It's not enough to be nice. We are to surpass the world in righteousness.** We are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. We are to imitate his perfect love even towards our enemies.

- ❖ Let me read v48, “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” Now you might read that and feel defeated. **But notice Jesus said to be perfect – not as God is perfect – but as *your* heavenly Father is perfect.** He's assuming you've been born again and adopted into his family, that you're filled with his Spirit, and you have his Father as your Father. So to call you to act like the Father and love like the Father is not asking too much.
 - ▶ This verse helps to clarify what a Christian is. **A Christian is *not* the man who reads the Sermon on the Mount and decides he'll live like this and try to be perfect as God is perfect.**
 - A Christian is the man who recognizes that his sin has created enmity with God. But who also recognizes the love that God has shown to us in that while we were still sinners – while we were his enemies – Christ died for us, reconciling us to the Father (Rom. 5:8, 10). So the Christian is not the one who's just trying to be perfect. He's the one who's trying to be like his Father.