

Love your Enemies, Imitate your Father

Matthew 5:43-48; 2 Peter 1:3-4

Turn to 2 Peter 1 please. We're going through the sermon on the mount, Matthew 5-7, which for Jesus is discipleship foundations. When we come to Jesus because he says "follow me" and we believe he has the words of eternal life, we want to know: what does following Jesus look like?

Matthew the writer deliberately puts all this together in one long sermon at the beginning of his Gospel. In Matthew 4, Jesus began calling people to himself, and we find out in this sermon what that means. We need to take a good look at what Jesus teaches, and what he ignores.

After Jesus began the sermon with the beatitudes, different ways of describing the good news from God, Jesus gives us six contrasts between how people understood the Law, and what Jesus teaches, which was also what the Law was after all along. Today we'll read the sixth contrast.

Sixth Contrast – You heard, "hate your enemy," I say, "love your enemy" Matt 5:43-48

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In this sixth contrast, Jesus gives us a motive for loving our enemies that he did not use in the other five contrasts. In the sixth contrast, he tells us to love our enemies *because that's what God our Father does.*

*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*** He takes care of his enemies. Be good to your enemies, therefore, as your heavenly Father is good to his enemies.

When you make a hard choice to do the right thing, when you do what the Lord wants even though something else pulls you, what motivates you to obey the Lord? What actually goes on in your mind and soul that gets you moving in the right direction? Why exactly do you obey?

As far as the Bible is concerned, there are many good reasons to obey the Lord, not just one, and we'll not get into that here. But Jesus gives us one here that we should take seriously. We want to imitate God our Father. If our Father is like this, then we want to be like this too. It is that simple. "Do this to be his children," says Jesus. "Do this because your Father does this."

We might think that imitating God is preposterous, but it is not. This last contrast, love your enemies, is probably the most distinctive and profound teaching of Jesus. Why would we do that? To be like our Father! Our Father in heaven is good to his enemies, so we are too.

And the most distinctive Scripture about being like God our Father is in 2 Peter, a book we rarely read. We'll spend a few minutes on 2 Peter 1, and then look more carefully at "love your enemies" in Matthew 5.

Share in God's divine nature – 2 Peter 1:3-4

2 Peter 1:3-4 *God's divine power has given us everything for life and godliness, through knowing him who called us.* God's divine power has given us everything for life and godliness. Sometimes these lines make us uneasy. Peter thinks we should thank God for this.

How do we get this? "*Through knowing him who called us.*" Knowing God changes people, knowing God changes us, knowing the God who called us gives us what we need for life and godliness. Is that not great? It is very good.

Don't make "knowing God" anything special or exotic. It means basic relationship with God – we pray to him, thank him, we sing to him, trust in him, pray the psalms, we obey his teachings as we are able, we confess our sins to him, we meet together as we are able, we bring our offerings to him, we celebrate the Lord's supper, we show his love to our brothers and sisters.

That basic relationship to God, that kind of knowing God, changes us. *God's divine power has given us everything for life and godliness, through knowing him who called us.*

To what did he call us? To his own glory and excellence. *God's divine power has given us everything for life and godliness, through knowing him who called us **to his own glory and excellence.*** God called us to share in **his** glory and excellence.

Partakers of his divine nature - *Who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has given us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may be partakers of his divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.*

Through God's remarkable promises, we become partakers of his divine nature. God shares his own nature with us, he passes on his divine nature to us, so that our own nature becomes modeled after his divine nature. Our natural self becomes like his natural self.

In the early church, Christians got very excited about this. We now not so much. We want to know that our sins are forgiven, and that God loves us. But there was a time when thoughtful believers pursued this.

Here's the whole sentence: *God's divine power has given us everything for life and godliness, through knowing him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has given us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may be partakers of his divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.*

God shares his nature with us, he passes on his divine nature to us, so that our own nature becomes like his divine nature. Our natural self becomes like his natural self. God sharing his divine nature with us is how we escape the corruption that's in the world. Without that, says Peter, we'd be corrupt just like the world. Is that not incredible? *We're* the Incredibles!

And how does our nature become like his divine nature? By knowing God, because knowing God changes people. All the different things regular parts of our God-life, what we do because we know God, those give us what we need for life and godliness, because by means of these things, God shares his divine nature with us. Now, back to Jesus, our Father, and our enemies.

Hate your enemy – Matt 5:43

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' The second part, "hate your enemy," is not in Scripture. But the whole sentence in Lev 19 does lead in that direction: *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge **against anyone among your people**, but love **your neighbor** as yourself.*

The Law of Moses spoke only about one of your people, your neighbour, and said nothing about enemies. So "hate your enemy" goes past Leviticus, but not very far. But Jesus changed it to "love your enemy."

This is perhaps the most radical teaching of Jesus. More than anything else, this marks out the followers of Jesus. They are still enemies, so "love" will not mean a warm relationship. What does it mean? Jesus says, "pray for them." Paul says, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them a drink." Instead of revenge, be kind, courteous, generous.

Act like your Father in heaven ...

In vv45-47, Jesus gives us two choices about who we will imitate. We can act like our Father acts, or we can act like ungodly people. Jesus gives us two examples of how our Father acts, and two examples of how the ungodly act. How does our Father act? He causes the sun to rise equally on evil people and good people; and, he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Many years ago the Sermon on the Mount overturned how I viewed God and nature. I grew up thinking that God made heaven and earth like a good watch - nature was a system that ran by itself, and ran in an orderly way, without ongoing care from God. That is actually deism, and not what the Bible teaches, although it is common among Christians.

If what God does with the sun and the rain is to have any meaning for us as an example, we need to grasp that it would be simple and normal for God to give sun and rain to his people, and to have his enemies live every day under dry cloudy skies. God could give sunshine and rain to his people, and at the same time have his enemies live without either. No problem. Easy.

We would expect our Father to do that. But he does not. He is kind to evil and unrighteous people. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says our Father is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Evil, unrighteous, wicked, ungrateful. He gives them sunshine and rain equally with his children. God has deliberately and intentionally set up sun and rain so that his enemies get the same as others.

Our parents shape us. I catch myself doing many things because that's how my Dad lived. I do many things because that's what I saw my Mother do. Jesus says, "you have a Father in heaven. Do what he does."

Jesus says to us, "Treat your enemies the way your Father in heaven treats his enemies. Do good things for them, act kindly toward them, help them, just like your Father does."

... Not like the ungodly

Now Jesus gives us two examples from ungodly people. *If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?*

That's clear enough. Here's what it boils down to: in our relationships with unpleasant people, we are either imitating God our Father, or we are imitating the pagans. That's how Jesus sets us up with difficult people: we act like our Father acts, or we act like the godless act.

Jesus assumes we want to be like our Father, and we do. He knows we will want to separate ourselves from those without God, and we do want to show ourselves different from them. But loving real enemies can be very difficult business.

Let's not make light of this. To be generous with those that have attacked us, to pray God's blessing on those who have injured us, to return kindness in place of hostility – wow. We have to really love the Lord even to picture ourselves doing this. But at least do that, okay?

Picture it. Imagine the ones who attacked and injured, and in your mind, picture how being like your Father in heaven might look. If you decided to imitate your Father, how would that actually look? What might you do or say? Imagine it happening.

There are psalms in which the angry psalmist prays for God to smite his enemies, break their jaw, throw them in a pit. If that's all you can say to God, then say it. Those psalms stand. But if we stay in relationship with the Lord, he will be pulling us in this direction, toward kindness and generosity toward our enemies.

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. That word “perfect” makes us nervous, but it should not. In the next chapter, Jesus says his followers need forgiveness from God every day, and his followers need to forgive one another every day, too. Whatever Jesus means by “perfect,” it is certainly not “sinless.”

What if the most significant thing about our Father is that he shows love to his enemies? What if, when we are good to our enemies, we are as much like our Father as it is possible to be? What if the one thing about God, that he above all would like to pass on to his treasured children, was how he treats his enemies? That’s what it sounds like to me.

Luke has the same line, except in Luke, the word is “merciful.” *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.* In Matthew it is “perfect,” in Luke “merciful,” otherwise the same paragraph. That kind of perfect, where we act out compassion toward our enemies.

The Six Contrasts: Relationships (5:21-48)

This is the last of the six contrasts, but they all are like this. 1st about anger: How do we act when we are angry at someone? Or someone is angry at us? Be a peacemaker, like your Father.

2nd and 3rd are about adultery and divorce – are we faithful and loyal to our spouses, body and mind, the way our Father in heaven is faithful to his people?

4th contrast: Do we always tell the truth, is our “yes” a real “yes” and our “no” a real “no”? Our Father in heaven always tells the truth. Be pure in heart.

5th contrast: Turn the other cheek. How do we react when people insult us, when they ask too much, when they are unfair? What would our Father do?

6th contrast: Are we generous with our enemies, as our Father is to his enemies?

These are what it means to be beatitude people. *These* are what makes us the salt of the earth. *These* are what makes us the light of the world. *These* are what makes us a city set on a hill. *These* make us what the world needs to taste and see.

These are what the Law of Moses wanted all along, *these* are Jesus not abolishing the Law, but fulfilling it. *This* is the righteousness that goes past the law teachers and the Pharisees, without which we will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

And the thing is, we don’t have to go anywhere to do this. This is entirely about the people already in our lives. This leaves no one out. I’m an old pastor and seminary teacher. This applies just the same to a school girl who wants to follow Jesus, as it does to me. (Except for adultery and divorce, I suppose.) But these all flow from the beatitudes, and they leave out NOONE.

Later in the sermon on the mount, Jesus tells us about people who say, “Lord, Lord, we cast out demons, and we prophesied, and we did all kinds of miracles.” And Jesus will say, “that’s not what the Father wanted, that’s not what I asked you for.”

And people will say, “Lord, we did so many spiritual things, and had such great experiences. We had such long devotions, and we denied ourselves so many things.” And Jesus will say, “but that’s not what the Father wanted, that’s not what I asked you for.”

By now we are a little uncomfortable, and this makes me uncomfortable, too. But don’t miss what the Lord wants. He’s been saying the same thing, in different ways, right through this chapter, from the first beatitude to the sixth contrast. How do we treat the people around us?

Here’s how Jesus summarized his teaching at the end of this Sermon: *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.* He was pretty clear, brothers and sisters, about what he wanted for us. And God is always helping us. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, you want to share your divine nature with us! Can that be true? Is it even possible? Well, if it is, we want it. You called us to your own glory and excellence, and we want that. We’re so glad we know you, and there is hope for people like us.

And Jesus urged us to imitate you by being good to our enemies, praying for them, taking care of them. Some of us have terrible scars, Father, and this is very hard. We don’t know where to begin. We feel paralyzed. We are poor in spirit. But we also love you. And we want to obey you, we want to do what pleases you. So we ask for help. We seek for help. We knock at that door. You began a good work in us, please complete it. You called us, please be faithful to see it done. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage our hearts and strengthen us in every good deed and word. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.