

“Love Your Enemies” (Matt. 5:43–48)

By Jacob D. Gerber

In Jesus’ final section in his exposition on the law, our Lord touches on perhaps the most difficult demand of the law: to love our enemies. No longer are we talking about our relationships with those closest to us—our brothers, our sisters, our spouses, and our friends. Now, Jesus says that we must even love our enemies, since our heavenly Father loves his enemies. Here, Jesus draws all of his teaching on the law into one imperative that not only summarizes this section, but the whole of his exposition on the law: *be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Resembling Our Father (Matt. 5:43–45)

For the sixth and final time, Jesus begins his antithesis with a summary of what the people have heard from what their teachers had said: “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy” (v. 43). There are two problems with the way that this quotation is formulated. First, while the beginning arises from Leviticus 19:18, the form in which it appears here notably drops the phrase “as yourself”: “You shall love your neighbor *as yourself.*” The final phrase “as yourself” clarifies that the thrust of this command is to tell us *how* to love our neighbor, so by dropping that phrase, the focus of interpretation shifts from the question of *how* to love our neighbor to the question of *who* our neighbor is (see Luke 10:29).¹

Second, as Blomberg observes, “The final antithesis is the first to begin with a quotation not entirely from Scripture.”² The final section of this paraphrase, “and hate your enemy,” appears nowhere in Scripture, although some have argued that the idea may be inferred from passages like Deuteronomy 7:2; 23:3–7; 25:17–19; Psalm 139:21–22; or the other imprecatory psalms.³ Through both of these ways of misquoting Scripture, the teachers of the law helped to rationalize a narrowed sense of one’s “neighbor” (which had been intended to be all-inclusive), and to justify even hatred against all those who fell outside the scope of the “neighborhood.”⁴ By both narrowing the scope of the law (*whom* to love, rather than *how* to love) and by changing the law to justify hatred of enemies, the traditional teaching had essentially declared the law to be optional and subject to the discretion of each person as to how they wished to extend their love and their hatred.

In direct rejection of this approach, Christ once again clarifies the true intent of the law by declaring, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (v. 44). Now, while the Scriptures never say, “hate your enemy,” we should also acknowledge that the Scriptures

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 254.

² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 114.

³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 114; Osborne, *Matthew*, 212.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:303–04.

(up to this point) never say, “Love your enemies.”⁵ Nevertheless, while Jesus’ words may have shocked his first hearers, it is clear that Jesus’ words accurately summarize the goal of the law in a way that the command to “hate your enemy” does not.⁶ Furthermore, because Jesus is drawing out the full implications of the Second Great Commandment, “Love your neighbor *as yourself*,” it is clear that he does not only mean “acts for the benefit and well-being of others,” regardless of whether we like them or not.⁷ Rather, in line with all his other antitheses in this section, Jesus is demonstrating that the law requires infinitely more than we imagine. Thus, this love must not remain external, but must permeate down to the depths of our souls to create a true attitude of affection that overflows in heartfelt prayer (not mere begrudging action) for our enemies.⁸

To bolster the command, Jesus gives a motivation and an explanation. For the motivation, Jesus tells us that we must love our enemies “so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (v. 45a). Now, we must not twist Jesus’ words to misunderstand his point. So, Jesus is not suggesting that we may be sons of our heavenly Father by seeking to do *all* that God does, for God’s rightful actions encompass the fact that he “frequently punishes the wicked, and drives the wicked out of the world. In this respect, he does not desire us to imitate him: for the judgment of the world, which is his prerogative, does not belong to us. But it is his will, that we should imitate his fatherly goodness and liberality.”⁹ Furthermore, we must not imagine that we love our enemies in order to *become* (in a meritorious or qualifying sense) sons of our heavenly Father. As France notes, “that status is already implied in the term ‘your Father who is in heaven.’”¹⁰ Finally, we must not take this passage to mean that God loves all people the same way. As many other passages demonstrate, God loves his elect with a special love that does not extend to all people.¹¹

Rather, Jesus adds an explanation to tell us exactly what he means by this “love” that we must extend to our enemies. Jesus is speaking about what theologians call God’s “common grace,” by which God showers temporal blessings indiscriminately on the whole earth, even as he does not extend his electing, covenantal love to the whole earth.¹² So, God just as God “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust,” so we also ought to love our

⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 315.

⁶ “Although in the form here expressed (‘Love your enemies’) Christ’s teaching was new, it did not contradict the law. Rather, it was the fruition of the seed planted earlier.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 315.)

⁷ Pace Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 136.

⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 225; Carson, “Matthew,” 191–92.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:306.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 226.

¹¹ “None of this should be regarded as a denial of the fact that there is indeed a love of God that is not shared by all. Such passages as Gen. 17:21; Ps. 103:17, 18; 147:20; Matt. 20:16; Luke 12:32; Rom. 8:1, 28–39; and a host of others prove this beyond any doubt. But just as a human father, in addition to uniquely loving his own sons and daughters, has room in his heart for his neighbor’s children, yes even for all the children in the world, so also the Father in heaven, in addition to sustaining an altogether peculiar relationship of tender concern and intimate friendship toward those who by his grace are his very own, loves mankind in general.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 315.)

¹² Carson, “Matthew,” 192.

enemies and pray for those who persecute us. God’s people are God’s children, so that their love toward others must resemble the love that their Heavenly Father extends to the whole world.

Resembling our Enemies (Matt. 5:46–47)

Jesus does not only speak about resemblance to God in a positive, aspirational way. He then gives the flip-side warning, by observing that to “hate your enemy” would make them resemble at “a moral and spiritual level” the tax collectors and the Gentiles “whom they so thoroughly despise” (vv. 46–47).¹³ The brilliance of Jesus’ words here is to expose the faultiness of common human thinking. When we excuse our hatred for our enemies on the basis that “they hate us too!”, or “they hated us first!”, then we are acknowledging (whether we realize it or not) that we are rationalizing why we have sunk to their evil level, becoming *like* them in retaliation for what they have been *like* toward us. That is, we become what enrages us, the very thing that we hate.

Although Jesus does not explicitly tie his teaching into the biblical idea of what it means for human beings to be created in the “likeness” and “image of God” (Gen. 1:26–27; 5:1; 9:6), he is invoking the concept by speaking of resemblance.¹⁴ Thus, we draw near to God by our spiritual resemblance, likeness, and similarity to him, and we become increasingly estranged from him by our “dissimilarity or unlikeness.”¹⁵ Since we were created in the image and likeness of God, Jesus is urging us to embrace that similarity by resembling God in our love for our enemies. The dangerous—and unsatisfying—alternative is for us instead to grow increasingly to resemble those whom we hate.

Righteousness through Christ (Matt. 5:48)

Ultimately, to resemble God we must be *perfect* as he is *perfect*.¹⁶ This perfection is the goal toward which we constantly strive, rather than any status of sinless perfectionism that we can attain in this life.¹⁷ This perfection is the full ethical demands of God’s infinitely high holiness. Therefore, Jesus’ conclusion here in v. 48 does not apply only to how we must “love our enemies,” but it is the righteousness that “exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,” which is required of any who would

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 315.

¹⁴ For a biblical exposition of the “image” as resemblance (whether to God, or to the “images” of idols), see Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion*, NSBT 36, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 59–68.

¹⁵ Augustine, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, 2nd ed. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), 235–36, §VII.12.

¹⁶ “This *perfection* does not mean *equality*, but relates solely to resemblance.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:308.)

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 253. John Wesley (and many following after him, including the “higher life” Keswick movement, and certain strands of Charismatic Christianity) taught that the most earnest believers may reach a “second blessing” of sinless perfectionism in this life. For an evaluation of this “over-realized eschatology,” see J. Gary Millar, *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*, NSBT 55, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 9–12.

enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20). This perfection is law that condemns our sinful anger, our lust, our divorces, our broken oaths and vows, and our private revenge—in addition to the way in which we must love our enemy (Matt. 5:21–42).¹⁸

Bruner also notes something important about the structure of the Sermon on the Mount so far:

We have risen considerably in this Sermon. At the beginning of the chapter we were with the *poor in spirit*; here at the end of the chapter we are with the *perfectly mature*. There we were in the valley; here we are on the summit. In the Beatitudes we were in deep need; in the Commands we are on high assignment.¹⁹

This insight helps us to understand the full significance of the law that Jesus teaches here in light of the gospel that he came into the world to accomplish. So, on the one hand, we must beware any legalistic attempts to lower the demands of the law. There is a legalist in all of our hearts who is constantly seeking to find loopholes to squirm out from under the crushing demands of the law. We must resist the impulse to excuse, justify, or rationalize what God declares to be sin—not only in our external actions, but even in the deep recesses of our hearts. Throughout Jesus’ teaching on the law in the Sermon on the Mount, he has been recovering the infinitely high standard of the law which he summarizes well in v. 48: required of us is perfection, just as our heavenly Father is perfect.

On the other hand, we must remember what Christ promised in the beatitudes: “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). Christ does not promise blessings for those only who are able first to ascend the mountain of God’s righteousness, or no one (apart from him) would receive those blessings. Instead, Christ promises to bless those who readily and freely acknowledge their shortcomings from the law, repenting from their sin and looking to Christ in faith. *We must* have a perfect righteousness if we would be saved, but we can only find that righteousness in Jesus Christ alone. In the gospel, Jesus declares that all those who turn from their sin and trust him by faith will be saved, both by the forgiveness of their sins and by the righteousness that he freely credits to them through that faith. Indeed, Christ does not place one law on us, only to ignore it for himself. We must remember that he is speaking about his own mission in the world, for “while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10). Jesus love his enemies all the way through his shameful death on the cross.

Then, for those who have been justified by faith, Jesus continues his work of salvation through the great renovation of our souls in sanctification. While we will never personally attain to God’s perfect righteousness, and while we are not judged by how far we are able to progress, Christ nevertheless begins to remake us into his image so that we increasingly resemble our heavenly Father through him.

Jesus has much more to teach us in this great Sermon on the Mount. If, however, we do not grasp this fundamental contrast between the law and the gospel, we will not be able to digest the rest. Meditate on this precious truth: while God has not in the least relaxed his perfect standard of righteousness, he has graciously sent his only Son to fulfill the demands of the law in your place. Christ Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried for you, because of your failure, and Christ Jesus was raised up for your justification, in order to credit to you his own righteousness. The standard has not been relaxed, but God himself provides the satisfaction of that standard through faith in Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ “The paragraph begun in v. 43 closes with a command that may equally summarize all six antitheses.” (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 115.)

¹⁹ Bruner, *Matthew*, 1:266.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the traditional teaching that Jesus quotes in v. 43 narrow and change the requirements of the Old Testament? What effect would this teaching have had in the lives of the people? What in the Old Testament justifies the new teaching that Jesus gives in v. 44: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”? What effect should this teaching have in our own lives? What is one relationship where this command is difficult for you to keep?
2. How does our Father in heaven love even his enemies (v. 45)? What does it mean for us to love our enemies as sons of our Father in heaven? How does our resemblance to God in our love for our enemies tie in to what it means for us to be created in the image of God? Why does hating our enemies cause us to resemble them, rather than God (v. 46–47)? Where do you need to repent from justifying hatred in your own life?
3. What does Jesus mean when he tells us that we “must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48)? In regard to loving our enemies, what does “perfect” look like? How does this standard of “perfect” relate to all the other areas of the law that Jesus has been teaching about in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:17–42)? Where are you tempted to legalism in looking for a loophole to avoid the “perfect” requirements of God’s law?
4. How has Jesus loved his enemies (Rom. 5:10)? How does Jesus’ love for his enemies inform how we should understand the “perfect” requirements of the law and the nature of the gospel? How does the gospel help us to avoid the legalistic impulse to minimize the requirements of the law? Where are you still trying to be “perfect” on your own? How does the gospel both free you from the condemnation of the law and lead you to grow in greater conformity to Christ’s image?