

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’<sup>39</sup> But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.<sup>40</sup> And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.<sup>41</sup> If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.<sup>42</sup> Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

*<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’<sup>44</sup> But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,<sup>45</sup> that you may be sons 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.<sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?<sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?<sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:38-48)*

### **Love Your Enemies!**

Do you have any enemies? That may seem like kind of a funny question to ask in church. My guess is that most of us would say “no” simply because “enemies” is such a dramatic word. We have people that we have conflicts with, but enemies? Not so much. But for the purpose of our discussion this morning, let’s take the word “enemy” to mean anyone who is hostile to you, anyone that you find yourself in conflict with all the time. Do you have any enemies, if we define it like that? Most of do, don’t we? Whether it’s a person at work or at school who always seems to make our life difficult or a neighbor we just can’t get along with or a relative that we have a lot of history with, most of us have conflicts with some people in our lives. Regarding those people, Jesus gives an incredible command, a command that you’ve heard before, but a command that goes against the way we react by nature: **love your enemies!**

#### **I.**

Jesus likes to challenge us, doesn’t he? He doesn’t want us to get too comfortable or complacent about our lives of faith. What he says here does challenge us. How can we love people who hate us, who torment us, who openly show hostility to us again and again? To answer that question, we need to understand what love means here. Greek has several different words for love and the word Jesus uses here is very common in the Bible, but very uncommon in the Greek language generally. Jesus is speaking of a kind of love that we don’t think about first of all when we hear that word. What do you think of when you hear the word love? What is a love song? What are poets going on and on about? Isn’t it a feeling? That feeling is real. We love our spouses. We love our children. Those feelings matter.

But the Greek word that Jesus uses when he says, “Love your enemies,” does not refer to feelings. He’s not telling us to somehow generate a warm, fuzzy feeling for someone who’s a master at making us feel bad. Jesus doesn’t command us to manipulate our feelings because emotions follow what happens. I feel good about positive things that happen and I feel bad about negative things that happen. While there is some room for me to interpret events positively or negatively, in general I’m going to feel love for people who treat me in a way that inspires warm, fuzzy feelings. If I try to manipulate a warm, fuzzy feeling when I really feel hurt or angry, it’s just not going to work.

That is not what Jesus commands us to do today. Instead, the word that he uses refers to actions and attitudes. Those things are in our control. This word reminds us that love is what we do to care for people. Love is that parent who’s exhausted after a long day at work, who sits down with the child who doesn’t understand that day’s math assignment and spends the whole evening working with him or her to get it down. Love is shoveling the walk for that retired lady who can’t get out and do it anymore. Love is that hug for the person who’s just lost someone they love or just gotten some bad news. It’s what we do. It can even be hard things. It’s love when we discipline our children because we want them to grow up knowing right from wrong. It’s love when we drag them out of bed on Sunday morning even though they stayed up until two in the morning on Saturday night. It’s love when we tell a friend that what they’re doing is sinful and they need to repent and change.

That’s the love that Jesus commands when he says, “Love your enemies.” You see that in the examples that he gives. He says, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’”** At least three

times, in the Old Testament God does say, “an eye for an eye” and “a tooth for a tooth.” But every time he says that, he’s talking about courts and justice. He’s talking about the right punishment for a crime. But the Jews of Jesus’ day seem to have turned this into a justification for revenge. When my older brother and I were kids, we called it “getting each other back.” He hit me on the arm, so I hit him on the arm.

Revenge is sin. Jesus calls us to love our enemy. He tells us that if someone hits us on the right cheek, turn to him our left cheek also. That doesn’t mean just take it. It means let him hit you again. He says that if someone sues you for your tunic – understand that in the ancient world, lots of people didn’t have much more than the clothes on their back – you should give him your cloak as well. Give him more than what he’s demanding. If someone forces you to walk a mile – and this refers to a hated Roman law that allowed their soldiers to compel people in occupied territory to carry burdens one mile – Jesus says rather than seething and hating and waiting to get free, at the end of the mile, carry the burden another mile.

How literal are these commands? Do they apply in every lawsuit or situation where someone is hurting someone else? Do they only apply to these kinds of situations? The answer to both questions is no. Jesus was talking about love. Doing what’s best for our enemies begins with not seeking revenge. But it goes beyond that. True love means working for the good of the person we love. These examples are illustrations of the principle: help and serve your enemy even when he doesn’t ask in a nice way. Give up your time and your effort, even when he doesn’t say thank you. Expose yourself to his bad behavior over and over again, without striking back, because that’s what love does.

Do you show this kind of love to the people in your life who torment you, who are unfair to you, who take advantage of you? If you’re at all like me, you have to admit that you don’t do this nearly enough. Our natural attitude is to fight to defend our rights and privileges. Someone hits us and we want to hit back. And Jesus says, “No! That’s sin.” God expects us to love even those who don’t deserve it. When we don’t, that sin earns for us death and hell. Jesus was talking to believers, to us, his followers, when he said these things. And we need to examine our lives and our attitudes and to recognize that when we refuse to love someone because they hurt us, we are guilty of pride and sin. We deserve hell.

But then we need to kneel before our Lord and plead for his mercy. We need to know what God says to us: “You are forgiven.” Jesus has taken even those sins away. That’s the miracle of the cross. God nailed all that pride and sin, all that failure to love, to Jesus. He paid for it all. Understand his payment went far beyond the simple pain of dying that way. On the cross, God the Father abandoned Jesus. He made him suffer hell itself there. He made him endure the eternity of pain and suffering and rejection that every sinner on earth deserves. Then he made him die because death, too, is the punishment for sin. God the Father made Jesus pay all that for you and for me. When he was done, all our punishment was over. When he was done we were bought and paid for. And Jesus rose to make sure we understand that. Jesus rose to make sure we know that every time we failed to love our enemy has been washed away. Jesus took all that sin away forever.

Now, he calls us to change. Again, we can’t change our feelings. But we can change our reactions. We can choose to do what is best even for people who hate us. We can display love and kindness to them day after day, even though we know that they’re going to abuse it. We can show them a measure of concern that they have never earned or deserved. When we do that, we’re not earning a place for us in heaven. We’re simply putting our faith into practice. That’s really what this text is all about. **Love your enemies. Work for their good.**

## II.

Jesus said, “**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 sons of your Father in heaven.**” God is asking us to be like him. Children imitate their parents. Most of us have had the experience of listening to a child talk and we hear that child’s father in the words he or she uses or we see the father in the mannerisms and even the facial expressions. It’s natural for children to imitate their fathers. Well, Jesus speaks to us today as the children of God and calls us to imitate our Father in heaven. And that does include imitating Jesus himself. When they crucified him, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” He prayed for people who were murdering him in the most painful and unjust fashion. Jesus calls us to follow his example and pray for those people who hurt us.

He calls us to imitate our Father in heaven. God causes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good. He sends the rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. If it were up to us, we might only send rain on the farms

of Christians and let the crops of unbelievers wither. We might bless only the businesses of people who come to church regularly and let those unbelievers go bankrupt. But God blesses the industry and effort of people who hate him. He loves the people who hate him – he works for their good every day.

He calls us to do the same. Jesus calls us to follow the work of the Holy Spirit when he says, **“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 brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”** The Christian life is supposed to be different from the life of unbelievers. It’s supposed to rise to a higher standard than what the sinful heart can imagine. But how often don’t we let the false ideas of our society determine how much we’re supposed to do for others? How often don’t we let our sinful hearts dictate that we should love only those who love us? God calls believers to higher standard than that.

In fact, Jesus says, **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** He doesn’t say, “Do the best you can.” He doesn’t say, “Have a standard of excellence.” He says, “Be perfect.” Not just like the best people you know here. Not just better than the worst people you encounter here. He says be perfect like God is perfect. That is the standard. That is what a Christian is supposed to strive for every day.

Can we achieve that standard? Absolutely not. But it is God’s standard. So what do we do? Every day we acknowledge our failures before God. We confess to him how hard it is for us to love as Christ loved. And every day we trust that in Christ all that sin is forgiven. He prayed for his enemies to replace all the times we didn’t. He loved his enemies because we fail at that every day of our lives. He did more than give us a good example. He lived the life we’re supposed to live and can’t. That life counts for us, just as much as that death and resurrection count for us. Through that life, that death and that resurrection, he has set us free from our sins.

In the joy that comes from being free comes the desire to live for him. In that good news that all our sin and failure have been erased in the blood of Christ comes the power to dedicate ourselves to living in love. My friends, today Jesus spells out what it means to love our enemies not to guilt us into doing better, but to guide us who want to live for him in a life that reflects his love. Pray for your enemies. Serve their good. Work for them. That’s what Jesus calls us to do and he gives us the power to commit ourselves to that life, every single day. Joyfully – for no other reason than that you are forgiven and loved – **love your enemies. Imitate your Lord.**

Love is not an easy road to follow. Jesus showed us that when he went to the cross for us – who were his enemies by birth. And no matter how good the example is that Jesus gave us, because we’re sinners, we could never follow it. The truth is, the way we were born, we’d never want to. So God did a miracle. He made us new. He came to us in the gospel of his love and recreated us. Now, God himself lives in us. He gives us the power to follow him. My friends, love your enemies. Work for their good and imitate your Lord. Amen.