

*“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 5:43-48)*

### **Be Your Father’s Children!**

A number of years ago, I read an anecdote in *Reader’s Digest* about a woman trying to get things ready for a big family Christmas. She was giving orders to her husband and her children and getting flustered because her youngest was under foot. Finally, she told the little girl, “Why don’t you go play with the manger scene.” The girl complied. But a few minutes later, the mother overheard her daughter saying, “You camels, get over there. You shepherds, set this table up and wash these dishes!” She heard her own voice coming from her daughter. This weekend, all over the country, families will go to great lengths to get together for Thanksgiving. People will watch and listen to children they haven’t seen in a while and many of them will be amazed at how much those kids are like their parents. Children – even grown children – reflect the words and the attitudes that they learned at home. At those family gatherings, you can look down the generations and see the influence from parent to child. That’s not just true physically. It’s also true spiritually. **Be your heavenly Father’s children!**

#### **I.**

Unfortunately in the world we live in, being our parents’ children isn’t always a good thing. Most of us parents cringe when we hear our children echoing our least attractive moments. But when it comes to imitating our Father in heaven, the more like him we are, the better off we’ll be. God’s greatest characteristic is his love. My friends, **be your Father’s children. Know what real love is.**

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.”** Now we don’t have the same saying, but “love your neighbor and hate your enemy” makes sense. It’s easy to love people who treat you well. And it’s natural to hate people who don’t. Most of us don’t have any trouble wishing something bad would happen to someone who hurts us. So how can we possibly love our enemies? Maybe we can convince ourselves to take the high road and refuse to come down to their level. But actually loving a person who has hurt you in the past and will do it again in the future? Isn’t Jesus asking the impossible here?

Yes, he is. But let’s be clear on what impossible thing he’s asking. The word that our Bible translates as “love” does not mean romantic love. It does not mean the love that we naturally have for our children and our friends and people who are like us. Often, we have a very warm feeling toward those people. But the word Jesus uses here isn’t a feeling word as much as it’s an attitude and an action word. Jesus is not telling us to manufacture some warm, fuzzy feeling for a person who takes joy in hurting us. How could we do that? The Greek word he uses here means to love in actions and attitude. Sometimes people say it means love them rather than like them. This word for love means that I work for the good of someone else, that I put their needs ahead of my own.

Jesus tells us to work for the good of people who torment us and make our lives difficult. Can we do that? No, not on our own. But we are not on our own. Jesus said, **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”** The key is taking after our Father. That’s what Jesus is telling us to do today. He’s not telling us to follow any human idea of what love is. He’s telling us to adopt a radical new point of view: God’s point of view and love like he loves us.

God loves people who don’t deserve it. He commands us to love in exactly the same way. And we don’t. Human love is selfish. Think about high school students. Who do they love? First of all, they love people who love them. They love the kids who are friends with them and who help them with their homework and who hang around with them and make them feel good. They love teachers who seem to care about them.

For those people, those kids will go to great lengths. They'll even lie to their parents and get in trouble to do what they think will help those people or make them happy.

Who else do they love? They love people who are loveable. They love people who are attractive, who have charisma – they love people that they look up to. Conversely they hate people who are ugly and who they consider to be stupid or socially inferior. They love people they understand and agree with and who view things the way they do or who add something that's missing from their lives and who help them to feel more complete. They hate people who are different from them, people who challenge them, people who cause them to question themselves.

They aren't the only ones like that, are they? Human love – our love – is selfish by nature. We love our families because they make us feel complete. We love attractive people and people who help us and people who agree with us. We hate people who want to hurt us or attack us. My friends, that love and that hate is sin because it's selfish. It's totally different from the universal love that God commands all people to have. That kind of love is really love for me. I love because it helps me and makes me feel good. That makes me my own little idol. When I love like that I kneel down and worship myself.

That false love deserves God's punishment in hell because it is the total opposite of God's love. God doesn't care who we are. God chooses to love us even when we are unlovable. God's love drives him to do what is best for us even when we sin, no matter what it costs him. That's the love God calls us to have and we just don't love like that.

But God does. Because he does, his own love drove him to find a way to keep us out of hell without sacrificing his own justice for our sins. The way God found was to send Jesus to love in our place. The whole story of the gospels is the story of Jesus living a life of love. And it's complicated. You can't reduce Jesus' love to simply being nice to everybody, because he wasn't always nice. He drove people out of the temple with a whip twice! He called his enemies snakes and liars and sinners. He called his closest followers "you of little faith." Jesus' love was more than just a feeling. It was actions. It was words that always said what the people around him needed to hear, even when they didn't like what love drove him to say. Jesus' love was so total that he lived a life completely without sin and then he laid that life down on the cross for us. He died for our failure to love. He suffered hell itself because we deserve it. He fulfilled God's justice so that we don't have to. When he rose, he gave us eternal life. He rescued us from the disaster we've made of our own lives.

That's the love that God calls us to imitate. Why? Because it's Thanksgiving and the greatest gift we've ever received is the love that drove God to send his Son to die and rise for us. There is only one way to say thank you to God: by trusting in Jesus and living a life of love. First of all, that means that we constantly hear about Jesus' love so that we trust in that love. Then it means that we love those around us because Jesus loved us.

## II.

That brings us back to our family Thanksgiving, where children echo their parents' words and actions, often without even realizing how like them they are. But often, also, embracing the attitudes and ideas that they've heard in their own home. This is our spiritual home. Here we learn what our Father is like and what's important to him. My friends, **be your Father's children. Show love like his.**

Jesus said, "**He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**" What if the rain only fell on the righteous? What if you could walk down the street during a rain shower and tell who was a believer because their grass was getting watered and who wasn't because you stepped out of the rain onto their rocky, dry dirt? What if unbelievers lived in a patch of darkness and you never got to see the sun until you came to faith? It would be totally just for God to do that. But he doesn't.

Why not? Because God loves even sinners. This life is our time of grace. That means this is our time to come to know our Savior and during this time, God blesses unbelievers just like he blesses us. God showers blessings on the entire world to say to every person in this world, "I do love you. I do work for your good. I do want you to live with me forever." He doesn't stop to ask if we deserve those blessings or not.

He wants us to live like that. Jesus said, "**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?**" Unbelievers love their children and their spouses and do what's best for their kids. The worst sinners love people who love them and welcome people who welcome them. God calls us to go much farther. He calls us to love those who hate us. He calls us to get down on our knees and

pray for those who persecute us and make our lives difficult. He calls us to work every day for the good of people who couldn't care less if we died.

Even after coming to faith, don't we have to admit that we don't love like that? That failure is our sin. But that's exactly what Jesus died to take away. Now, in his great love, Jesus comes to us in the gospel and he equips us to love as our Father loves. He awakens in our hearts a desire to be like our Father, even in loving our enemies. And in the gospel he gives us the power to live like that. We are different today than we were before we were God's children. Now, even without realizing it, we are growing more and more like him. God calls us to embrace that change he's making in us. He calls us to let the love of Christ drive us to live in love.

How far are we to go? Jesus said, **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** That's the goal. Total, perfect, selfless love, just like Jesus showed us. Now, can we achieve what Jesus commands? No. Not in this life. We will always fall short. But that means that there is always more room for us to sacrifice more and to grow in serving the good of others. And because we do all that out of faith in Christ, God does declare our imperfect efforts to be perfect. He views them all as if Christ himself had done them.

And he promises that the day will come when at last we can fulfill this command. In heaven, we will be perfect. At long last, we will imitate our Father without fail. Until that day comes, God reminds us each day of his love for us in sending a Savior. He calls us to live in thanks for him – to be like our Father. And he even provides the strength to do that. Tomorrow as you gather with your earthly family, as perhaps, you sit with the father who raised and loves you here, remember your heavenly Father. Love as he has loved you. Amen.