



IF YOU LOVE THOSE WHO LOVE YOU, WHAT REWARD WILL YOU GET?

~ MATTHEW 5:43-48 ~

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“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.



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Back in December of 2007, an interesting event happened on the New York subway. A young man by the name of Hassan Askari became a hero. He saw a group of ten thugs beating up on another young couple, because instead of saying “Merry Christmas” had said, “Happy Chanukah.” Hassan jumped on one of the thugs to stem the beating, and was immediately beaten up. Hassan’s actions gave this Jewish couple the opportunity to grab the emergency brake lever and get help. What makes this story even more remarkable, was that Hassan is a Muslim. How often have you heard of a story of a Muslim helping a Jew?

That story encapsulates what Jesus spoke about in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and really is what Jesus is talking about in our gospel for this morning. How easy it could have been for Hassan to not get involved, it was none of his business, especially with the animosity between Jews and Muslims. It seems only natural that we love and help those who will love and help us back. And Jesus is not against this. But he also asks the question, **“If you love those who love you what reward will you get?”** Jesus wants us not to think of the reward of reciprocity when we love, but the reward of God. A reward that comes from **LOVING PERFECTLY**.

1. Love Like God
2. Love From God

(1)

This question Jesus asks was first directed at the crowds surrounding him when he was giving his famous Sermon on the Mount. Jesus saw these people as sheep without a shepherd, they were looking for someone to guide them, and the Pharisees weren’t doing the job. With this sermon, Jesus turned the people back to God, he gave them the spiritual water their soul was thirsting for. In this section of Scripture, Jesus is not coming up with his “new” interpretation of what it means to love, but instead he is again turning the people back to God. He is telling the people to love like God.

He begins, **“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, maybe the first question you might ask, is where is it said, “Love you neighbor and hate your enemies?” We know in the Old Testament it is written, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” What seems to have happened is a “logical” addition by the Pharisees, and a limiting of what it means to love. If you love your neighbor, then logically you would not love someone who is not your neighbor. Do you see why it was so necessary for Jesus to bring these people back to what God’s Word said?

It’s so easy to love those who love you, this is natural. But to love someone who doesn’t love you, that’s a little bit more difficult. So many people view their neighbor as the person you live next to, the person you have things in common with, your co-workers. But in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus doesn’t limit a neighbor just to those people, but to anyone and everyone. He explains it here when he says, **“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** Let that sink in for a minute. Love your enemies...and pray for them? Yes, love your enemies! How different this is from the way of the world.

Just turn on the news or open the newspaper and see how much love for the enemies is going on. You have Palestinians vs. Israelis, Republican vs. Democrat, pro-choice vs. pro-life, gay rights vs. opponents of gay rights. We look at the story of the good Samaritan as a wonderful story when it happens, but very few people are willing to go that far if given the chance. It doesn’t even have to be the issues that are captivating our nation’s attention. It can be your own personal battles that you fight. The bully in school, your nemesis co-worker who is always brown-nosing the boss, the person who has hurt you – emotionally, physically. Anyone whom you may not have a desire to hang out with. Jesus says to love them too.

We might think that Jesus has gone off the deep end, he’s imagining some sort of utopian society where everybody gets along. But that’s not the case at all. Jesus is very much talking about the real world we live in. He quite frankly admits there will be enemies. But he still says, he still demands PERFECT LOVE for your enemies. How often have you showed this perfect love? Perfect love does not just mean you don’t take revenge against a person, it doesn’t mean that you have an indifferent attitude toward that person, it means you care for them. You give them your extra coat, you walk with them that extra mile. We may argue that we haven’t been mean to our enemies, but that’s not going to fly in God’s court, especially when he says to love them. I have a hard enough time showing this type of love to those who love me, let alone my enemies. I have missed the mark not only on loving my enemies, but also on loving my neighbor. And that is what sin is, missing the mark, missing the target. When we miss the target, we miss out on heaven.

“Love like God” Jesus said. And all we can say is, “I can’t” See the love of God: **“God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”** But even this is not the extent of the love of God. The love of God is found in the person speaking those words. John 3:16 says, **“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** This is God’s love. But we needn’t look at it as some standard that we have to follow. To look at it like that is missing the whole point. God loved us so much and sent his Son, not as an example of love, but also to replace our lack of love.

Jesus asks a pretty point blank question today, **“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?”** Everybody loves those who love them, it doesn’t make you extraordinary to be the best friend you can be. What makes you extraordinary is loving your enemies. That’s the first thing you can take away today. But the other thing to take away is to realize where the power to do this comes from and why you are doing it.

2 Corinthians 5 states, **“Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died.”** It is Christ’s love that compels us to do what is unnatural. The love that God showed each and every one of us has an impact on our lives. The Holy Spirit has worked in our stubborn hearts of stone, not only to believe this message, but also to be fueled by that message to go out and love like God. **“Anyone who loves me”** Jesus says, **“will obey my teaching.”**

Understand clearly though why we do this. We don’t live a Christian life in order to get saved, as if God could somehow take away his forgiveness from us. We live a Christian life because we are saved. We have the strength and the power to be able to love not only our neighbor but also our enemy. But this leads us to the next point, what does this love look like? It may not be what you think. I think a general definition that people could accept for love is to care for another person, or another thing. But let me give you a few examples and see what you think love is.

A nine-year old kid wants to stay up late eating junk food while watching R-rated movies. How does a parent show love? Your co-worker starts complaining and griping about your boss behind his back. How do you show love? A friend is confronted about his online porn addiction. How do you show love? These are just three examples between people that care about each other, and I think it would be safe to say love is shown in not allowing the child to do what he wants, to not join in the complaining about your boss, and telling your friend the sinfulness of his actions.

But God says to love our enemies too. Loving our enemies means to set aside any personal grudge we have against them. Loving our enemies means to care about their physical, emotional and spiritual well-being, just as we care about our own. That’s why loving our enemies does not mean compromising values. Loving our enemies as God loved his enemies means that we still have to call sin for what it is, sin. When Jesus was in the temple one time he got angry and kicked the money changers out of the temple. Jesus was right in doing this because he was caring more for their souls than for the direction their lives were taking them. We love our enemies because we don’t want to see them suffer in hell.

The only way we can love our enemies like this is knowing the love of God for us. We were God’s enemies, conceived and born in sin, and God is opposed to anything that is not holy. As good as you think you are, it is not enough for God to love you. But God loved you anyway. **“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** That is a love that goes beyond understanding, a love that we cannot fathom. That’s why the apostle Paul says, **“And this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and gave his Son to die for us.”** As believers, we show God to be our Father when our desires line up with his desires, when our love for sinners lines up with God’s love for sinners, that is a perfect love.

Many of you know that I am a Green Bay Packers fan. And one of the Packer's greatest coaches was a man by the name of Vince Lombardi. He began coaching the team in 1959. The year before the Packers were terrible, they won one game, lost ten, and tied one. The first time Lombardi walked into the locker room he said these words, *"Gentlemen, we are going to relentlessly chase perfection, knowing full well we will not catch it, because nothing is perfect. But we are going to relentlessly chase it, because in the process we will catch excellence."* That was the mentality Lombardi instilled in the Packers.

As Christians, we take the same attitude to life. We will relentlessly chase perfection in our words, in our actions, in our lives. We will not catch it, but that doesn't matter, we will still pursue it, because that is God's will. Because **"Anyone who loves [God], will obey [his] teaching."** May God give you strength to chase perfection. Amen!