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First Baptist Vancouver
Darrell W. Johnson
Text: Matthew 5:43-48
Title: "Love? Enemies? Really?"
(Series: Following Jesus into His Sermon on the Mount)

We are currently following Jesus into the now famous Sermon on the Mount. In the text we just read, we come to what many people consider the 'high-water mark' of the whole Sermon. In the text Jesus uses the word, for which He is best known. He uses the verb 'love'. But He uses it in a very surprising context! He uses the verb 'love' face to face with the person who is seeking to hurt us in some way. He uses the verb 'love' face to face with the person who does not like us, and may want to get rid of us, in some way. Then Jesus gets hold of us, as individuals and as a community; when He causes the Kingdom of heaven to invade the earth; 'love' starts happening in situations when we least expect it!

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour, and hate your enemy, but I say to you, *love your enemy*.'" Love? Enemy? Really? Before wrestling with Jesus' seemingly impossible command, we need to ask: to whom is Jesus referring when He says, "You have heard it was said, 'hate your enemy'"? What authority said 'hate your enemy'? Not the Bible! Not the Old Testament! Nowhere in scripture do we find 'love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. Jesus is here addressing a mis-interpretation of God's revealed will held by some of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time. It is a mis-interpretation due to a tendency to accommodate God's will to the so-called 'real world.' The tendency to make God's will 'more realistic'.

As John Piper rightly observes, "often our mis-interpretation of God's word is not due to innocent intellectual slips or lack of information but rather a deep unwillingness to submit to the demands of God". Nowhere does the Old Testament teach 'hate your enemy'. Oh, yes, there are places in the Old Testament where people do hate their enemies. But nowhere does any authority teach 'hate your enemy'.

Indeed, not only is 'hate your enemy' not in the Old Testament, there are clear signs that the will of God moves in the opposite direction. For example, Exodus 23:4-5: "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its lead, you shall refrain from leaving it there, you shall surely release it." Or Job 31:29-30: "as part of his protest of innocence." Job states, "Have I rejoiced at the extinction of my enemy, or exulted when evil befell him? No, I have not allowed my mouth to sin by asking for his life in a curse." Or Proverbs 25:21, which the apostle Paul quotes in his letter to the Romans: "if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he thirsts, give him a drink" (12:20).

More significantly, the word 'neighbour' as in 'love your neighbour' was never intended to be an exclusive word. The Greek for neighbour (plesion) means 'that which is nigh or standing near', friend or foe. The Hebrew for neighbour (reya) means 'comrade' or companion' whoever is near. Thus the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber says that in the Old Testament neighbour

means “the person with who I have to do at this moment, who is encountering me right now; the one who is my concern at this instant, no matter whether a blood relative or a total stranger” (In Pinchas Lapide Sermon on the Mount, 79). You can see then that in His sixth, and culminating “You have heard it was said... but I say to you”, Jesus is making explicit what was implied in the earlier revelation of God’s will. All along “neighbour” would have to include the enemy. All along, love extended to the neighbor who likes us was to be extended to the neighbour who does not like us. “I say to you, love your enemy.”

Really? Jesus...we have to press You here. Do You really mean to use the words ‘love’ and ‘enemies’? Or are You exaggerating to make some other point? Love? Enemies? Lord, you are asking us to do the impossible!

To which I think Jesus says: “Yes, I do mean ‘love’ and ‘enemies’. And no, it is not impossible. To which we respond “Not impossible! Help us Lord. Why is your command not impossible? To which I think Jesus says: “For one thing, My word is the creative word. My word not only informs... it performs. My word has the power to bring into being what I command. In the beginning I said, ‘let there be light’, and there was! Outside the tomb of my good friend I said, “Lazarus, come out’, and He did! Now I say, ‘love your enemies’, and you will! And for another thing, I only command you to do what I think you are able to do. This is impossible.

You see, Jesus does not say ‘like your enemies’; Jesus does not say ‘feel good feelings for those who hurt you’; Jesus does not say ‘fall in love with those who mistrust you’. What helps me understand this seemingly impossible command is to realize Jesus chooses His words carefully. As you may know, the Greek language, the language of the New Testament, uses many verbs which we render with the single English word “love.” There is the word ‘storge’. Storge is the love of family. Jesus does not say ‘storge your enemy’. There is the word ‘eros’. Eros is the love of beauty. Eros is the love which is intoxicated with the object of its admiration. It is the love swept off its feet by the beloved. Jesus does not say ‘eros your enemy’. There is the word ‘philia.’ Philia love is the love of mutual respect. Philia is the love two friends have for one another because they respect each other’s character and abilities. It is the love of ‘the good’. Thus we have words like ‘philanthropy’ – love of humanity, and ‘philosophy’ love of wisdom. Jesus does not say ‘philia your enemy’.

The word used in the Sermon on the Mount is ‘agape.’ Agape is the love born out of decision. Agape is the result of a choice. It is not ignited by the loneliness or goodness of the other. Agape is energized by an act of the will. Agape is the decision-love. Agape is the will to will the good will of the other, even when the other does not deserve it. Agape is the love with which God loves us!

Now here is why I have bothered with the language lesson. You cannot command storge. You cannot command eros. You cannot command philia. But you can command agape. And that is what Jesus does. ‘I say to you, agape your enemies’. Choose . . . as an act of the will...to respond to your enemy’s hate by willing his or her good will. What else helps me understand Jesus’ seemingly impossible command is to realize He has chosen the word ‘enemy’ intentionally. Jesus calls the person who wants to hurt us in some way ‘enemy’. He does not command us to deal with such people by calling them by some other politically correct term, which will then

somehow mute the tension. He does not say ‘just stop thinking of the other as ‘enemy’ and you will feel better.’ He does not say “just think of the other as a victim of his or her past, who is helplessly working out their unresolved pain on you.” Oh, such advice would, and does, help. It does help to understand where the other is coming from. People in pain often inflict pain. But such advice will not finally bring about the desired behaviour on our part. Jesus calls the other, who hurts us or wants to hurt us, ‘enemy’. Which is to say that we will not obey Jesus’ command to love the enemy until we first own the fact that we hate them. We will not love our enemies until we acknowledge that they feel like enemies to us; and that deep down we hate them for the way they hurt us. We will not love until we first face the fact we hate.

Ad such hate is understandable. Understandable to God. For even God hates. God hates what the enemy has done. God hates the hurtful and evil words and deeds. The Living God does not just fold His hands and spout pious platitudes in the face of wrong doing. For us to do so insults the holiness and justice of God. We ought to be very angry...as God is! When someone is raped, when a drunk driver causes an accident, when drug dealers sell their poison to children, when children are kidnapped and forced to be soldiers, when people sneak around sabotaging our reputations. We are not alive if we do not initially respond with something akin to hate. We certainly are not alive to God’s passion for Shalom, for wholeness, for right-relating, if we do not in some sense hate whatever destroys Shalom. We are not ready to love the enemy until we first admit that we hate. They who wrote the psalms understood this and that is why they pray the way they do. They know God’s will. They know God’s call to the higher level, the higher way. Yet they do not fake it. Before they can love they have to first be honest that they hate.

We saw this last summer in our series on Psalms. Psalm 109: “When he (who has spoken evil to me) is tried, let him come forth guilty. May his days be few, may another seize his goods...” (7-10). Psalm 10: “Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer” (15). Psalm 58: “Oh God, break the teeth in his mouth” (6). They pray that way because that is the way they felt about their enemies. And that is the way we feel. Right? And we will not be able to love the enemy until we first face the fact we hate the enemy.

Eugene Peterson, in his book on the Psalms, puts it this way: “It is easy to be honest before God in our hallelujahs; it is somewhat more difficult to be honest in our hurts; it is nearly impossible to be honest before God in the dark emotions of our hate.” But, Peterson says, we have to follow the Psalmist, and learn to be that honest. “We must pray who we actually are, not who we think we should be,” he says. “The way of prayer is not to cover over unloving emotions so that they will appear respectable but expose them so that they can be enlisted in the work of the Kingdom” (Answering God, 100).

Let us be still for a moment. Bring before the Lord the person who has hurt you. Admit you hate them. Tell the Lord, “I hate them.” “But I say to you...love your enemies.” Not like them. Not feel good about them. Not gush near them. Will to will their goodwill. Why? And how? Why? For three reasons.

First, to break the cycle of hate. To keep on hating those who hurt us only makes the vicious cycle keep going. Hate for hurt, or hate for hate, only multiplies hate. And slowly, but surely, as Martin Luther King used to say, we descend into “a spiral of destruction” (Strength to Love, 51).

Only light can break the spell of darkness. Only love – agape love – can stop the chain reaction of hate.

Second, we agape love in order to keep our souls from rotting. To keep on hating those who hurt us rots our souls. Hate changes the hater. As I well know. Hate distorts our perspective. Hate distorts our personhood. Hates can destroy parts of our bodies. Hate hurts the one being hated. But it also, and primarily hurts the hater, as you psychologists can tell us. Hate divides the self. Love unites the self.

Just before Christmas, I finished reading the book ‘Unbroken’ by Laura Hillenbrand. It is in the story of Louis Zamporini, who, during World War II suffered in unbelievable ways. The bomber he was flying over the Pacific Ocean was shot down. He drifted on a life raft for months, struggling with thirst and starvation, with sharks and enemy aircraft firing on him. When he finally made it to dry land, he was placed in enemy prisons, and treated like an animal, for years. One prison guard especially treating him in evil, demonic ways. “The Bird” as the prisoners called him. By the grace of God, Zamporini made it through that hell and was released when the war ended. But he still lived in hell because of his hate for the Bird. This is how Laura Hillenbrand assesses the condition of Louis’ soul:

“No-one could reach Louis because he never really came home. In prison camp, he’d been beaten into dehumanized obedience to a world order in which the Bird was absolute sovereign, and it was under this world order that he still lived. The Bird had taken his dignity and left him feeling humiliated, ashamed and powerless, and Louie believed that only the Bird could restore him, by suffering and dying in the grip of his hands. A once singularly hopeful man now believed that his only hope lay in murder. The paradox of vengefulness is that it makes men dependent on those who have harmed them, believing that their release from pain will come only when they make their tormentors suffer. In seeking the Bird’s death to free himself, Louie had chained himself, once again, to his tyrant. During the war, the Bird had been unwilling to let go of Louie; after the war, Louie was unable to let go of the Bird” (Unbroken pg 366-367).

His life fell apart...in every way: relationally, psychologically, economically, physically. His wife felt she had no choice but to leave him. “Cynthia packed her things, took the baby, and walked out. Louie was alone. All he had left was his alcohol and his resentment; the emotion that Jean Amery would write, “nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past” Pg 368. But praise be to Him, Jesus got a hold of Zamporini. The Kingdom of heaven broke through. I will not tell you how; I do not want to spoil the story for you. And Zamporini miraculously – I use the word intentionally – miraculously came to let go of hate for the Bird. Ms. Hillenbrand again:

“In the morning, he woke feeling cleansed. For the first time in five years, the Bird hadn’t come into his dreams. The Bird would never come again. Louie dug out the Bible that had been issued to him by the air corps and mailed home to his mother when he was believed dead. He walked to Barnstall Park, where he and Cynthia had gone in better days, and where Cynthia had gone, alone, when he’d been on his benders. He found a spot under a tree, sat down, and began reading. Resting in the shade and the stillness, Louie felt profound peace. When he thought of his history, what resonated with him now was not all that he had suffered but the divine love that he believed had intervened and saved him. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his

humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation. Softly he wept (376). We obey Jesus' command to agape love the enemy because we do not want to spiral down into the poison of hate, and because we do not want our souls to rot.

And third because we want to be whole. That is, we want to be like the Father of the Lord Jesus. "Love your enemies...in order that," says Jesus. "In order that you may be," says Jesus. "In order that you may be sons and daughters of your Father who is in heaven (5:45). The Father, says Jesus, "Causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteousness" (5:45). The love of the Father is indiscriminate and scandalous. God loves those who love God. And God loves those who do not love God. And He showers both with the same goodness.

Dale Bruner puts it this way: "The Communists and the capitalists, the rebels and the reactionaries, the redo and the rednecks, the whole lot, get just as much rain as the devout and the dedicated, the Bible students and the evangelists, the prayers and the socially involved." By this even-handedness God displays his maturity to the world and his will to his disciples" (The Christbook, 221). Love ... "In order to be children of the Father." This suggests to me that we will obey Jesus' command to agape-love our enemies to the degree that we know the Father-heart of God. Love "in order that you may be..." Not in order that you "may become," but be. Love in order that we might truly be who Jesus has made us – children of His Father. Be like the Father who loves indiscriminately ... and scandalously.

This is how we are to understand the startling word at the end of the text before us: "You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). This word perfect is "telios," and it means "mature." "You are to be mature in love as your heavenly Father is mature in love." I will develop this further next Sunday. How? How are we to exercise mature agape-love for enemies? In three ways. First, in simple deeds. Agape-deeds. Nothing fancy or super-heroic, just simple deeds of goodness. In Luke's Gospel Jesus says "do good to those who hate you" (6:29). Paul expands on this by quoting the Proverbs text we noted earlier: "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. Pious Utopia dreaming? Or the power of the Kingdom of God?

John Makarion was for many years President of a college in Beirut, Lebanon. Then in the 1980s the violence began to escalate. Most of the families in his apartment building evacuated. John and his wife decided to stay. One day they heard enemy soldiers enter the building, and start to destroy apartments floor by floor. Soldiers would beat anyone left in the rooms. As they continued their terror, John and his wife hurriedly made coffee and pulled sweet cakes from the cupboard. When the soldiers pounded on the door, John opened it, and with a wide smile said, "Please come in and share our cakes and coffee, you must be worn out." With astonishment on their faces, the soldiers came in, sat down, ate and drank, and went on their way. Agape your enemies with simple deeds of goodness.

Second, agape by word. Jesus tells us to pray for those who persecute us (5:44). And bless those who curse us (Luke 6:28). In the Jewish mind to bless or to curse was to speak a word which in some mysterious way made things happen. Which is why Jews are careful about uttering a blessing or a curse; once uttered the reality brought into being cannot be altered. "Shalom

alekem” – “peace be to you” Is more than a polite greeting. You are asking God to fill the other person with the Shalom of God. “Bless your enemies.” Speak words of good will. “May you know the Mercy of God”; “May you be filled with the grace of God”; “May the Lord not hold against you the hurt you have afflicted.” Something happens. If not in the enemy, at least in you and me. Bless those who curse you. And pray. Many have called this command the “supreme command”. For there is no greater act of love than to pray. Why? Because in prayer we are bringing the other into the presence of the Only One who gives us life. We are giving the greatest gift. It is like taking your enemy to the doctor; only in this case, the Doctor is the One Who alone can redeem and recreate.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, living through the reign of Adolf Hitler’s rage, wrote: “Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God. Jesus does not promise that when we bless our enemies and do good to them they will not despitely use and persecute us. They certainly will. But not even that can hurt or overcome us so long as we pray for them. For if we pray for them, we are taking their distress and poverty, their guilt and perdition, upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them.

And here is the line that gets me every time I read it: “we are doing vicariously for them that they cannot do for themselves.” As with every one of Jesus’ commands, He calls us to do what He Himself does. On the cross He cries out: “Father forgive them” (Luke 23:24). Forgive my enemies. And millions have followed Him in that agape love. Stephen, as he was being stoned to death, cried out: “Father forgive them” (Acts 7:60). James, the brother of Jesus, as he was being executed, cried out, “I beg you Lord, God, forgive them for they know not what they do.” And here is the Gospel in all this: as we keep blessing and praying for our enemies, one day it dawns on us, that they are no longer our enemies! For through interceding for them at the foot of the cross, the enemy slowly becomes my brother or sister for whom Jesus died. Agape – deed. Agape—word. And friend, surrender. Agape by surrendering to the agape-love of God. We are empowered to agape not by asking how the enemy treats us, but by asking how the Father treats us. For were we not the Father’s enemies? Were not all human beings, by virtue of our sin, the Father’s enemies?

During this season of Lent, I keep being drawn to the fifth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul is overwhelmed by the love of God in Jesus. The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit Who is given to us,” he rejoices (5:5). And upon whom is this love poured out? On those who are helpless, says Paul: “while we were still helpless” (5:6); and on those who are ungodly (5:6); and on those who are sinners: “while we were still sinners” (5:8). And on those who were enemies, says Paul, God’s enemies: “while we were enemies” (5:10). God goes to the Cross for His enemies! God goes to the cross for me! “You have heard it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy! But I ... your Master, your Savior, the Lover of your souls ... I say to you, ‘love your enemies.’”

Impossible? Not if the Preacher on the Mount knows what He talks about. Not if the Preacher on the Mount holds our wounded-hearts in His hands. Not if the crucified Preacher on the Mount holds us in His heart. Not if we stand beneath His cross and surrender to the Love that dies for our enemies. Bring before the Lord the person you brought to mind earlier. The person you

“hate.” As an act of your will, pray for that person. Take him or her to the cross. Kneel down by him or her, and pray.