

BUT HE STARTED IT
Matthew 5:43 - 48

INTRODUCTION:

Our theme for 2008 is "Authenticity". Since the first of the year, we've been working our way through the Sermon on the Mount. We've seen a pattern in some of the passages we've studied lately. Jesus tells us what the Old Testament Law says and then he demonstrates that in the Kingdom of which he is the King, the laws are not the same. The laws in Jesus' Kingdom fulfill the Old Testament Law and they seem to run counter to the way of the world.

Just last week, we saw that Jesus commands that his followers not retaliate when someone offends, insults or hurts them. In fact, if Jesus' followers are hit on one cheek, they are to turn the other. If someone sues to take their shirt, his followers should give their coats, too. If Jesus' followers are forced to walk a mile, they should walk a second mile, as well.

This pattern continues in the instruction we are going to study today: Jesus' teaching about how we are to deal with our enemies.

Marc Axelrod, a preacher in Potter, Wisconsin, wrote:

It's easy to love people who treat you well. Like your parents. They take care of you. They feed you. They put a roof over your head. And they buy you presents on your birthday.

And it's easy to love your Grandma. She gives you cookies and ice cream. She takes you to McDonalds. Sometimes she even lets you stay up past your bedtime.

It's easy to love people who treat you well. But how do you love someone who doesn't treat you well? How do you love the kid who tries to trip you when you're walking down the hall at school? How do you love someone who tries to make you look like a fool?

And how do you love the boss who takes all the credit when things go right and gives you all the blame when things go wrong? How do you love someone who walks all over you and takes advantage of you and doesn't appreciate your hard work?

Jesus wants us to love our enemies. So we're going to talk about how to do that, and we're going to talk about WHY we should do that.

Now notice something: Jesus did not deny that his disciples would have enemies. In fact, in a sense, he acknowledged that we will...and then he told us how to cope with them.

But let me warn you: you will find that Jesus' teaching about how to cope with our enemies is going to be counterintuitive to our natural reaction; it will be at cross-purposes with the way other people treat their enemies and it will not be the same as the Old Testament Law. But it will fulfill the Law, it will lift you above the world and it will free you from your enemies.

Let's start with the text: Matthew 5:38-48. (That is found at the bottom of page 959 and the top of 960 in the pew-Bibles.)

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

I. Love For Our Enemies is Required (5:44)

The place we must begin is with the observation that love for our enemies is required. Jesus said, "*I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*"

A few weeks ago, I said that almost always, the source of anger is: feeling that you have been treated unjustly, feeling fearful, feeling hurt or feeling frustrated. One or more of these feelings is usually is why we become angry.

Well, in the same way, for practical purposes, we can define an enemy as one who makes us angry...that is, one who causes us to feel as if we are the victim of injustice, fear, hurt or frustration.

Jesus said that we are to love our enemies. Now, when Jesus said that, the word he used for "enemy" is from a root that means, "to hate". Wouldn't you agree that hate is a very strong word? Well, so is the word "enemy".

Usually, the person that we see as an enemy is one who we see as unjust, or who frightens or intimidates us, who hurts us or who frustrates us or frustrates our purposes. Jesus knew that we hate to be treated unjustly; we hate to be frightened or intimidated; we hate to be hurt and

we hate to be frustrated. It is a small step from hating the condition to hating the person whom we believe has caused the condition.

If we can define an enemy as someone who we see as unjust, or who frightens or intimidates us, who hurts us or who frustrates us or frustrates our purposes, that is a start toward understanding this requirement to love our enemies. But that is only a start. We must also define what Jesus meant by "love".

The word Jesus used for "love" refers to a decision, not an emotion. Your enemies may frighten, frustrate or infuriate you and those are emotions. But in spite of your emotions, you can choose to love them. Love, as Jesus used the word here, is a commitment to seek the best for another.

Jesus taught that the world says we are to love our neighbors and hate our enemies. Our neighbors are those who are like us. The world says we are to love the people who are like us and we are to hate the people who frighten, frustrate or infuriate us. But Jesus says we are to seek the best interest of those who make us see red.

Let me give you an example of what this might look like. I was reading about the former Boston Red Sox Hall-of-Fame third baseman Wade Boggs. He used to hate playing at Yankee Stadium. Not because of the Yankees, they never gave him that much trouble, but because of a fan. The guy had a box seat close to the field, and when the Red Sox were in town he would torment Boggs by shouting obscenities and insults. Wade Boggs was a new believer, so he was wondering, "Lord, what do I do about this situation?"

One day before the game, while Boggs was warming up at third base, the fan began his typical routine, yelling, "Boggs, you stink! You're a bum!" Finally, Boggs decided he had enough. He walked directly over to the man, who was sitting in the stands with his friends, and said, "Are you the guy who's always yelling at me?" The man said, "Yeah, it's me. What are you going to do about it?"

Wade Boggs took a new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, tossed it to the man, and went back to the field. The guy never yelled at him ever again; in fact, he became one of Wade's biggest fans at Yankee Stadium.

That is what I mean about deciding to seek your enemy's best interest.

So, in practical terms, how can you seek the best interest of your enemy? Jesus didn't leave us to wonder. He said we are to pray for our enemies.

I once had a man tell me, “Darrel, I’ve been praying for you but you’re still here.” That is not the kind of prayer I’m talking about.

There is a category of prayer in the Old Testament called “imprecatory prayers.” Imprecatory prayers are prayers that invoke judgment or retribution on someone. For instance, Psalm 35 is an imprecatory prayer. In that psalm, David prays, “*May those who seek my life be disgraced and put to shame.*” That is a kind of a curse. There are a lot of curses that David prays down upon his enemies in Psalm 35.

When Jesus told us to pray for our enemies, he was not advising us to pray down the wrath of God upon them. He was telling us to pray for their blessing and well-being.

Now notice this: Jesus’ words are not a suggestion, they are a command. They are not optional; they are requirements. Billy Sunday once said, “Too many people have a great deal of religion and no love.” Jesus said that his followers are to be known for their love and that includes the love they have for their enemies.

II. **Love For Our Enemies is Rewarded (5:45a)**

As disciples of Jesus, love for our enemies is required. And, it is rewarded. Jesus said, “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.*”

The people of Jesus’ time and place spoke Aramaic. That was a contemporary dialect of the Hebrew language. Hebrew is a very simple, basic language. For instance, almost every Hebrew word is based on a three-letter root. When translating Hebrew, all a person has to do is identify the three-letter root and work from there. Everything else is either prefix or suffix so it is pretty easy to look up the root word in a dictionary and then figure out the meaning of the prefixes and the suffixes.

Hebrew is a simple enough tongue that it doesn’t have many adjectives so the language uses the phrase, “Son of” with a noun to create an adjectival phrase. If someone was called “a son of peace” that meant he was a peaceful person. If someone was called “a son of consolation” that meant he was a consoling person. Barnabas was called “the son of encouragement” and that meant he was an encouraging person.

In this text, Jesus said if we love our enemies and pray God’s best for them, we will be sons of God. That is, we will be Godly. We will be Godlike men and women.

If we would be like our Father, who is in heaven, we must seek good even for our enemies.

And that really brings us to the third point: that love for our enemies is revealed.

III. Love For Our Enemies is Revealed (5:45b)

Jesus gave us a perfect illustration of what love for our enemies looks like. Jesus said to look at our Father's example. God causes the sun to rise on the just (His friends) and the unjust (His enemies). He causes the rain to fall on the just (His friends) and the unjust (His enemies).

Most of us have wondered why bad things happen to good people but have you ever wondered why good things happen to bad people? It is because God loves everybody: His enemies as well as His friends. If God gave His friends only blessings and never trials, He would be acting like the worst of us. If He brought troubles only to His enemies and never to His friends, He would be acting like the worst of us.

God has shown us what He requires of us by bringing blessings to those who love Him and those who do not. In fact, God so loved His enemies that He gave His only begotten son to die for them. In Romans 5:7-8, Paul wrote:

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

God has shown us what He requires of us by bringing blessings to those who love Him and those who do not. And then He commanded that we are to follow His example.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus did not deny that we would have enemies. Jesus, himself, had enemies. But he taught that one measure of our maturity is the way we deal with our enemies. Isn't that a sobering thought?

- People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Love them anyway.
- If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
- If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
- Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
- The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
- The biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest pride. Think big anyway.

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- People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for some underdogs anyway.
- What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
- Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you've got anyway...because if you give the world your best, you will truly be like your Father, who is in heaven.

INVITATION: *"For God So Loved the World"*