

Reconciled Accounts:

Examine Your Hatred and Love

Matthew 5:43–48

ENGAGE: [Cf. Haddon Robinson] **Ramon Narvaez**, the nineteenth-century prime minister of Spain, was dying and was asked by a priest, “Does your Excellency forgive all your enemies?” “I do not have to forgive my enemies,” replied Narvaez, **“I have had them all shot.”**

We often shoot our enemies. To act otherwise is foolhardy; it’s better to get them before they get us. Even if we don’t fire at them, **we rarely treat them kindly.**

FOCUS: To love an enemy would be an extraordinary feat. That would take a different sort of person with a different kind of righteousness. Jesus said that type of righteousness is internal. It grows out of a relationship with God and into a relationship with other people. It’s not legalistic, and it’s not something we can define.

SET THE STAGE biblically: Today we return to our study of one of the greatest sermons ever given, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The central subject Jesus develops in this sermon is: How can anyone have a righteousness that passes muster with God. What Jesus tells us about this subject is that such righteousness has nothing to do with rules and regulations; it has to do with relationships—a relationship first with God and out of that a relationship with other people. This idea is central to the Sermon. Jesus strikes this note early. “Unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the experts in the law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20 NET). Think of it! The *Pharisees* were members of one of the most important and influential religious and political parties of Judaism in the time of Jesus. The Pharisees were strict and zealous adherents to the laws of the OT and to numerous additional traditions. **Jesus says we need something more than a mere outward religious performance. God is concerned about your heart, my heart.**

Jesus tells us here that to enter the kingdom of God we must understand the spirit of His commands, and practice and teach them. The law deals with the spirit as well as the letter. We keep God’s law not merely by outward conformity, but as we submit to God’s will in our hearts. WOW! This puts a new twist on Christianity doesn’t it? God is not simply focused on our outward religious acts of piety and obedience. In our Christianity, God looks at our heart response to Him.

Now in our passage of Scripture for this morning we are going to consider the sixth case point of this kind of right living Christ calls us to as His followers. Matthew 5:43–48 is the sixth case point of this kind of righteousness. Do you demonstrate by your response to those who oppose you that you truly know and reflect God’s love to others?

PREVIEW: This morning we will see how Christ expects us to respond to those who oppose us.

ANNOUNCE the passage: Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:43-48. [p. 853.]

EXAMINE YOUR ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS TOWARD THOSE WHO OPPOSE YOU

“You have heard that it has been said, ‘Love those within your own circle and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘love your enemies and pray for those who are persecuting you,’ in order that

you might be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” Matthew 5:43–45a (personal translation). “You have heard that it was said, ‘**Love your neighbor**’ and ‘hate your enemy.’^{5:44} But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you^{5:45} so that you may be like your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:43-45a NET).

The Old Testament Law said we are to love our neighbors. [SLIDE:] “You must not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the children of your people, but you must love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:18 NET). [Blank Slide]

From the negative perspective God says, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people.” We are **not** to maintain vengeful feelings toward someone. For example the **ex-spouse** that has treated you badly, or **the supervisor** at work that makes life difficult for you, or **the teacher or bully** at school, or the **neighbor** who seems to delight in provoking a reaction from you. “*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people.*”

Now God adds a positive dimension: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In other words, **respond with direct and helpful action toward your neighbor**, just as you would desire for them to do to you.”

Now in **Exodus 23:20-22**, God tells the children of Israel: SLIDES: “See, I am sending my angel before you to lead you safely to the land I have prepared for you.²¹ Pay attention to him, and obey all of his instructions. Do not rebel against him, for he will not forgive your sins. He is my representative—he bears my name.²² But **if you are careful to obey him, following all my instructions, then I will be an enemy to your enemies, and I will oppose those who oppose you.**²³ For my angel will go before you and bring you into the land” (Exodus 23:20-23a NET). [Blank Slide]

These verses may indicate that it was Jesus Christ Himself, as God’s messenger who led the children of Israel to the place prepared for them. (Cf. John 14:1-6.) Since God promised to oppose those who oppose His people, Israel, **the popular opinion of Jesus’ day, as also today was: “You only have to love those who love you.** Hatred towards enemies is allowed by God.” Those who wore their righteousness like a three-piece suit wanted to take a close look at the word “neighbor” in the command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Whom exactly did it mean? The person next door? Across the street? Across town? Across the state? Across the country? Across the ocean? Where do we draw the line?

Those folks figured it out. They decided where to draw the line. A neighbor was someone close. To those outside their immediate circle they could be indifferent. There was a whole mass of people they regarded as enemies and were free to hate.

But Jesus says the Old Testament Law does not teach that. Notice Jesus’ command to us in Matt 5:44: “Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44 NET).

What does it mean to love your enemy? The word here for love, *agape*, speaks of God’s love for us. God’s love motivated Him to give His Son, Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ freely gave His life so that we might live. The full extent of Jesus’ love meant giving His life for us on the cross. Jesus’ love toward us becomes the example of the sacrificial love we ought to have for others, including our enemies.

“Immanuel Kant, the philosopher, read these words about loving our enemies and dismissed them as absurd. He insisted it was impossible for people to love their enemies. **If we are talking about the feeling kind of love, Kant was right. We can’t control our feelings that way. We**

can't light emotion as we would a match and blow it out as if it were a candle. If we are talking about emotional love, the command is beyond us.

This love for our enemies God calls us to though, is not primarily based on emotions; it is a mindset, an act of the will that says, **"I will do what is best for the other person whether I am dealing with friend or foe."** It is directed and active kindness. You and I demonstrate this love as we demonstrate **"an unconditional commitment to an imperfect person in which we give ourselves to bring the relationship to God's intended purpose"** (Michael Wilkins, *Matthew: NIV Appl. Comm.*, p. 266). Give yourself unconditionally to whatever it is that God designed for your various relationships. So as you think about your relationships with other people give yourself unconditionally to God's intended purpose to your wife or children or next-door neighbors or co-workers or fellow classmates

This is the love God demonstrates for us, "in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8 NET). The impact of God's love for us is felt even more deeply as the apostle Paul goes on to say, "For if **while we were enemies** we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, since we have been reconciled, will we be saved by his life?" (Romans 5:10 NET).

APPL: How can we love our enemies? How can you love **a spouse or ex-spouse** that has become your enemy? Who's always putting you down? Who rather than demonstrating respect to you, repeatedly demonstrates scorn and disdain? A spouse who rather than nourishing and cherishing you, belittles you and treats you with contempt? **Revel in God's love for you!** While you and I were still sinners, enemies of God, God loved us! The first reason we can love our enemies, whether it be an enemy in our families, or a boss or co-worker, or a fellow student or teacher at school, is **because we have experienced God's love for us through Jesus Christ.** We've experienced the ultimate form of love. Jesus gave his own life for you and me.

To love our enemies does not mean that we must condone their behavior. To love our enemies does mean that we are so engaged in their lives that we are used by God to reconcile them to Him and to bring them into alignment with God's will for their lives. **Love others as God loves.**

Deal with every person, whether friend or foe, as if you like them. Seek their highest good, not because you like it but because you make it the attitude of your mind.

APPL: With other loves, we feel and then act. **With this kind of love we act, and sometimes as a result, we feel. Therefore we can love our enemies. **There are some husbands or wives here today and you say, "I no longer feel love toward my spouse."** Jesus says to you this morning, "Seek the highest good for your spouse. Choose to respond with love.

Trans: Now in v. 44 Jesus commans us "Love your enemy and PRAY for those who persecute you." One way to love your enemies is to pray for them. It is very difficult to go into God's presence and pray for His will to be done in a person's life and then come out bearing anger and hostility toward them. As you pray for someone you find that it will make a difference in the way you see and act toward that person. Praying for our enemies helps us to see the other person from God's perspective.

APPL: Do you have someone who opposes you? Pray for them. To pray for another person is godlike. When you seek the best for your enemies in the presence of God you will find yourself

responding with God's kindness toward that person. "The more love, the more prayer; the more prayer, the more love" (D. A. Carson, *EBC: Matthew*, 158).

What are we to pray for our persecutors? The context makes clear that Jesus means we are to **pray good things for our enemies**. Our attitude toward individuals who hurt us personally or corporately must be love. When the first Christian martyr Stephen was dying "*he fell to his knees and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!' When he had said this, he died*" (Acts 7:60 NET). If the cruel torture of being pelted with rocks and stoned to death could not silence Stephen's prayer for his enemies, what pain can justify us being silent?

APPL: **Do you have some people giving you a hard time?** Perhaps a supervisor at work, perhaps a fellow student, or neighbor, or spouse or ex-spouse? Whoever is giving you a hard time, **pray for them**.

TRANS: Now Jesus gives us the motivation for loving others in v. 45.

REFLECT THE LOVE OF YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN TO THOSE WHO OPPOSE YOU.

Jesus commands us: "Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, ^{5:45} so that you may be like your Father in heaven, since he causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt 5:44-45 NET).

APPL: Often we speak of a child bearing a family resemblance to one or both of his parents. We see family likenesses in children's physical appearance and in their behavioral patterns. We say of a son, "He's a chip off the old block." Of a daughter we say, "She's the spittin' image of her mother."

Jesus tells us here, "**You are never more like your Father in heaven than when you are demonstrating God's love indiscriminately, both to your friends and your enemies**. God causes His sun to shine on the evil and the good. He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous, because it's His nature to do so." **As you love your enemies** as well as your friends, **you reflect the character of God**.

****The Greek text in v. 45 says literally:** "be sons of your Father in heaven." Here, however, the focus is not on attaining a relationship (becoming a child of God [NKJV "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven"]) but rather on **being the kind of person who shares the characteristics of God Himself** (a frequent meaning of the Semitic idiom "son of") [cf. NET notes]. So when Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be like your Father in heaven," He does not urge you or me to do these things to become His child. We are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because we are God's children. Again, **it is a family likeness**.

When you and I love our enemies, when we respond with active kindness to those you have mistreated us we display the characteristics of God Himself. We identify ourselves as God's children. ILL (Robinson): It might be convenient to drive through the country and know that fields rich in grain belonged to the Christians, and that the dry, shriveled crops belonged to non-Christians. But God doesn't work that way. When He sends rain, it falls on believers and blasphemers. When God makes His sun shine, the atheist gets as warm as the Christian. God deals with enemies and friends alike. **When we deal with both enemies and friends with their highest good in mind, we are like God**.

APPL: When you treat friends and enemies with equal kindness, when you seek the highest good for your enemies, you show you are in God’s family. Jesus calls you and me to pattern ourselves after God’s character. Jesus calls you and me to live a superior way of life than those around us.

ILL: So when a neighbor or co-worker doesn’t treat you right, remember, **God is providing you with an opportunity to demonstrate His love to your enemy.** God desires for you and me to be a light that points people to His great love for them in Christ.

Trans: God calls you and me to display a higher level of love than the world around us does. Note vv. 46-47: *“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax collectors do the same, don’t they? ^{5:47} And if you only greet your brothers, what more do you do? Even the Gentiles do the same, don’t they?”* (Matt 5:46-47 NET). **If you only love those who love you, what reward will you get?** If you greet only your relatives, how are you different from anyone else? Even the tax collectors do that. **The tax collectors** were the scum of society in the ancient world. “The *tax collectors* would bid to collect taxes for the Roman government and then add a surcharge, which they kept. Since tax collectors worked for Rome, they were viewed as traitors to their own people and were not well liked” [NET notes].

Around April 15th we’re not too fond of them either, but in the ancient world they were considered traitors. **If you love those who love you, how are you different from the tax collectors or gang-members?** They have a commitment to their own. Even those people love those who love them—at least their mothers and other gang members.

When Jesus speaks of greeting someone, He does not mean a simple “Hello, how you’re doing?” To greet someone in the Middle East is to wish the best to them. Their greetings are all bound up in blessing. Blessing on you, blessing on your children, blessing on your children’s children. Even the pagans did that. In fact, their greetings were known for that. **If we bless only the people we like, Jesus said we are no different from the pagans.**

Jesus is saying that nonbelievers ceiling ought to be our floor. Their love ends with family and friends, but that should be only the beginning of our love. We start where they stop. The high end of their friendliness scale is the low end of ours.

****The reason we do this is to reflect our Father’s love to the world. We love our enemies, not primarily to make them our friends, but to show them God’s love.**

ILL: Someone once castigated Abraham Lincoln for his benevolent attitude toward Southerners, whom the critic considered enemies. Lincoln replied, “What better way to destroy an enemy than to make him a friend.” Good response. But that is not why we do it. While it may happen in the process, that is not our motivation. Nor do we do it because we believe we can draw enough goodness out of their hearts to transform them. That is both simplistic and unbiblical. **The truth is, you can love your enemies and they may spit in your face. They may see your love as weakness and take advantage of you.** An unreasonable supervisor at work may continue to take advantage of you. But God urges you and me to continue to reflect God’s love toward them. Continue to pray for them.

ILL: Some of you today, if the truth were known are facing an adversarial relationship with your spouse. Your response of love to your spouse is met with rejection. **Perhaps because of a lack of forgiveness he or she will not let go of the past.** You are constantly being put down, not being respected. How are you to respond? Christ says, “Pray for your enemies.” **God calls us to love**

our enemies so that we reflect the love of God our Father to them. When people see you loving those who do not love you and seeking the best for those who have made themselves your enemies, they see something godlike. And that is the basis of evangelism! Pray for God to bring about a change in their heart and attitude.

ILL: Pastor Gene Getz tells about a man who served as a lay leader for several years at Fellowship Bible Church North in the Dallas area. Gene states, “Mike is a banker. One Saturday morning, he and Sharon were eating breakfast. As they looked out their kitchen window, a bus pulled up in front of their home. A number of people got off the bus, picked up placards and **began to picket** in front of their house.

In a few minutes, a man knocked at the door with a document in his hands. He wanted Mike to sign a statement that his bank—a large Savings & Loan conglomerate throughout Texas—**demonstrated prejudicial decisions against minorities in making loans.** Standing beside this man was another individual with a camera, **ready to take a picture of Mike’s reactions**—assuming they would be negative, which would probably be displayed the next day in *The Dallas Morning News*. **In reality, what had happened was that the United States government had passed legislation that had been interpreted by minorities as prejudicial treatment.** Since Mike was the CEO of this large Savings & Loan association, those minorities targeted him as a means to make their point. In short, **Mike was set up. As a Christian how would you have responded?** Our reaction might have been less than mature. Mike’s response illustrates in an incredible way what it means to love your enemies. **Rather than defending himself or reacting negatively, Mike invited all of the picketers into his home.** Naturally, the man at the door with the document in his hands was totally taken back—as was the entire group. However, recognizing Mike’s offer was sincere, they laid down their placards in a pile on the front lawn and all marched into his family room. **Sharon served them coffee while Mike explained his personal concerns for minorities, as well as the history of his own involvement with minority groups in the city of Dallas.**

When the natural opportunity came, Mike shifted his focus from his involvement in social activities to an experience that he had several years before. **Mike had come to know Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior, which he told the group, even intensified his concern for helping others.**

At this point there was a decided change in the reactions of the group. Mike even began to get some affirmations from some of these strangers. **Mike had won their hearts.** They began to see more clearly his own perspective on what was happening in our society. After a period of time together, the people stood up, thanked Mike and Sharon for their hospitality, and one by one walked out the door and got on the bus and left. They were never heard from again.

Mike and Sharon both demonstrated unusual maturity in that situation. Very quickly, a negative response on Mike’s part could have led to an argument. If he had “slammed the door”—which we might have been tempted to do—he would have played into their hands. More importantly, he would have missed the golden opportunity to share both the message of Christ and Christlikeness.

The conclusion of Jesus’ message here is found in the last line of **Matthew 5:48**: “**So then, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect**” (Matt 5:48 NET). The sense is: “Be fully developed in a moral sense like your heavenly Father is fully developed in a moral sense.” The word used here for perfect does not mean sinlessly perfect. The word was used of a sacrifice

offered to God. It had to be perfect, that is, without blemish. **It is used and translated most often as *maturity*, as opposed to what is childish.** It was used to speak of a teacher, as opposed to a student. **It's the sense of being well-rounded or complete, of fulfilling the function for which you were made.** If we say, "That is a perfect tomato for a salad," we are not passing judgment on the character of the tomato. We are speaking of its ability to perform a function, to add flavor and appeal to a salad.

ILL: Willie Mays was elected to the Hall Of Fame in 1979, the first year that he was eligible. Later that year, Baseball Commissioner, Bowie Kuhn banned him from baseball because of his work for an Atlantic City casino. When Mays was reinstated by the baseball commissioner [Peter Ueberroth] 6 years later a sport's writer said of him, **"He was probably the perfect ball player."** He did not mean that Willie Mays never struck out, never dropped a fly ball. He meant that Willie Mays was well-rounded. He excelled at all five facets of the game: hitting, hitting for power, running, fielding and throwing. And he knew the strategy of the game. That was how Jesus used the word *perfect*. **We are to be perfect as our heaven Father is perfect—in the context of love.**

This statement goes back to the Old Testament. In the covenant with Abram in Genesis 17, the promises given in vv. 2-8 are preceded by the command: "Walk before me, and be perfect" [or blameless] (Gen. 17:1. In other words, God tells Abram, "Serve me faithfully and be blameless." Cf. also Deut. 18:13, "*You must be blameless before the Lord your God*" (Deut 18:13 NET). Lev 19:2: "Speak to the whole congregation of the Israelites and tell them, 'You must be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy'" (Lev 19:2 NET).

To sum up what Jesus is saying, here are three truths to live by:

Inasmuch, as you deal lovingly with people, you are well-rounded and complete.

As God does not discriminate in showing love, neither should you or me.

You are never more like God than when you act in love toward another human being.

Haddon Robinson states a truth most of us can identify with when he says, "Sometimes as I read this section of the Sermon on the Mount I feel the poverty of my life. I feel a kind of bankruptcy because this is the kind of person I ought to be and want to be. But I am very conscious that I am not. And that realization drives me back to poverty of spirit, which is the basis of our relationship to God.

"The Beatitudes begin by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God." This section of the Sermon on the Mount fulfills its purpose if it drives us back to God for the inner righteousness of thought and motive only He can give.

Have you come to that point in your Christian life where you recognize your own spiritual brokenness? We cannot live as God wants us to in our own power.

You and I can't simply decide, "From here on out I am going to love my enemies." I may indeed become upright. But my uprightness will be like that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. It passes muster with people, but I will never get into heaven with it.

You and I can only live **in relationship to God**. And in that relationship, God works in us to establish the same kinds of relationships with others—a relationship with God that does not allow us to be satisfied by keeping the letter of the Law externally, but gives us an internal desire to keep the spirit of the Law.

“Alfred Lord Tennyson, in writing about archbishop Thomas Crammer, said, “To do him a wrong was to beget a kindness from him. For his heart was so rich . . . that if you sowed therein the seeds of hate, they blossomed love.”

“Like Crammer, we must understand the heart of God. One enemy is too many.” [Haddon Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living*,” pp. 161–68.]

Who are your enemies? Who seems to have it in for you? What would God have you do to reach out to them? Would you purpose right now to be God’s channel of love to them? How many of you would say today, “With God’s divine enablement I will seek to respond with love to those who are my enemies.” Would you purpose to constantly pray for them?