

Matthew 5:43-47

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Jesus offers and commands a radically different view of love than what is offered by the world.

The parallel account of this teaching is found in Luke 6:27-28, 32-35.

Jesus continues expanding upon His teachings on mercy. *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'* Jews in Jesus's day were, like most of us, keenly aware of who was on "their side" and who was "against them." They were familiar with the command from Leviticus 19:18 "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." But the natural emphasis for Jews and *Gentiles* alike was narrowing its application to those they defined as "your people" or *your neighbor*. Everyone is quick to justify their behavior and define their *neighbor* in a manner that narrows *neighbor* to only being those on their "side" (Luke 10:29).

According to the world's system, anyone who is not our *neighbor* is naturally our *enemy* and is not deserving of our *love*, but our *hate*. This was reinforced by the Jews who could point to passages such as Deuteronomy 23:3-6 to find examples of those they should not *love*. From this list it would be natural and easy to add other people to the list of enemies to *hate*, such as the Romans if you were a Zealot, a Sadducee if you were a Pharisee, a Pharisee if you were a Herodian, and so on.

But Jesus did not come to teach the natural social law of the world. He came to teach His supernatural law of love.

Once again, speaking in His own divine name and authority, Jesus begins His teaching with the increasingly familiar phrase, *But I say to you*. Astonishingly, Jesus commands His disciples to *love your enemies*. This radical concept goes against human nature, and everything the world teaches.

The term used for *love* is not among the Greek words commonly used throughout classical literature. It is not "philos" which means mutual friendship. It is not "eros" which means "strong desire," and frequently used to describe sexual desire. It is "*agape*" (G25). *Agape* is used to describe the Christ-like brand of *love*. *Agape love* is based on choices rooted in values, irrespective of emotions, appetites or affections. Jesus admonishes His disciples to make a choice that goes against affections.

Before the New Testament was written, *agape* was a rarely used word and was a generic term for affection. But the writers of the New Testament (following the translators of the Greek Septuagint of the Old Testament) made it their own and employed it to describe the kind of *love* God has for us and the kind of *love* He desires us to have for other people—*neighbor* and *enemy* alike.

Paul gives the fullest definition and description for *agape* in 1 Corinthians 13. To *agape* someone is to seek their best, patiently, kindly, and sacrificially. *Agape* is seeking the best for others rather than seeking an opportunity to brag or elevate self. *Agape love* is also given unconditionally, without demand for reciprocity. *Agape love* trusts God for His *reward*. None of these actions are natural, or feel good. Patience is choosing not to react to irritants, which is difficult. Kindness is experiencing trouble on behalf of someone who you don't expect can return the favor. Sacrificing for others without hope of tangible and immediate return is hard. But a disciple is to look beyond what can be seen.

Agape is the lifestyle of a true and happy servant. It is the characteristic of a Christ follower (John 13:35). And Jesus's disciples are able to have *agape* for others because Christ first had *agape* for us (1 John 4:19). In each case, the motivation for *agape* is because this sort of sacrificial behavior is in our long term interest, because God will *reward* us. The Apostle Paul stated that *agape love* of others is necessary for our actions to yield profit (1 Corinthians 13:3).

Jesus commands His disciples to *agape (love) your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*. Instead of wishing *enemies* harm and judgment, we are to intercede on their behalf to God, that He will show them mercy. This is what Jesus did when He was nailed to the cross, asking His Father to forgive those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). When we do this our *enemies* cease to be viewed as *enemies*. It frees us from *hate*. We can see them as fellow travelers in need of mercy. When we *agape (love) our enemies* we become like Jesus who agaped (loved) us while we were still His *enemies* (Romans 5:7-10). And as we *love and pray for our enemies* who *persecute* us, we become more like Jesus the Son, which leads us to become *sons of our Father who is in heaven*.

Jesus shares the reason His followers are not to treat others according to the world system—why it is in their best interest to be radically different and *love their enemies and pray for those who persecute* them. The reason is *so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven*. Loving one's *neighbor* and one's *enemies* is akin to being a peacemaker; both acts of love share the same blessings—"they shall be called the sons of God" (Matthew 5:9).

The notion of becoming a "son" is likely offered in the context of ruling sovereigns in the ancient world. Becoming a "son" was a *reward* for faithful service. A faithful vassal would receive "adoption" as a "son" of the king, gaining honor and royal privileges, as a *reward* for faithful service. God will *reward* those who seek harmony, or *righteousness*. Jesus repeats this reward of sharing His reign to those who "overcome as I overcame" (Revelation 3:21).

The *reward* of being a "son" was bestowed upon Jesus for faithful service in taking on human form and doing the will of God (Hebrews 1:5). Both the C and B' portion of the Beatitudes include a promise of the future *reward* of reigning with Christ, the B' portion in verse 9 being expressed as "they shall be called the sons of God." Being a son means taking on kingdom responsibility. Part of seeking Shalom, being a peacemaker, is to call out false teachers, as Jesus will do to the Pharisees (Matthew 23). For a body to be healthy, diseases must be removed.

God's natural and supernatural grace is freely offered to everyone. God's natural grace is seen in that *He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the*

unrighteous. God does not send the rain only for those who *love* Him. God's supernatural grace is demonstrated "in that God sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him" (1 John 4:9). As God offers the mercy and grace of *agape* (love) to everyone, so should His followers desire to *be called sons*.

For emphasis, Jesus then asks four rhetorical questions organized as an enthymeme. An enthymeme is a three-part logical statement of two premises and a conclusion, where one of these three parts is presumed rather than stated. Enthymemes let the hearer actively solve the logical problem instead of passively being told every part.

For the first enthymeme, Jesus asks, *For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same?* The inferred enthymeme might be stated as:

Premise 1: Since we all want rewards (unstated),

Premise 2: And we don't get rewards from God unless we love our enemies,

Conclusion: Therefore we ought to love our enemies.

Tax collectors were reviled throughout the Jewish world because they had 'sold out' to the enemy of Rome. Yet Jesus observes that even these perceived lowlives understood their self-interest sufficiently to be kind to those who were kind to them. It is easy to follow the implications of Jesus's logic: if you love only those who love you, and despised *tax collectors* do the same, therefore you are no better than a despised tax collector. The only *reward* you can expect is the reciprocity you can gain from other people. If you want a *reward* from God, you must rise above the level of behavior of the *tax collectors*. It is interesting that Matthew includes this teaching of Jesus, because Matthew was a tax collector before he followed Christ. Jesus will call Matthew as one of His inner twelve disciples in Matthew 9:9.

If our view of *love* is purely transactional, then we will only receive the amount of benefit equal to the amount of *love* we give others. In other words, this kind of *love* and its *reward* are like water. They will never rise higher than its source. We will only receive (at best) the exact amount of *reward* for our *love* in proportion to the amount of *love* we give others. Jesus wants us to consider *love* according to His kingdom's economy which is infinitely greater in both its supply and *reward* than that of the world's. Jesus wants His disciples to gain great rewards, eternal rewards that do not rust or decay (Matthew 6:19-20). Loving our enemies is a path to that result.

Jesus repeats the same basic enthymeme form when He rhetorically asks, *If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even Gentiles do the same?* In the eyes of Zealots and many religious leaders, (Roman) *Gentiles* were even worse than *tax collectors*. They were the occupying force and source of oppression. Once again *if you only greet your fellow Jewish brothers, what more are you doing than the Roman others* (who only greet other Romans). *Even the Gentiles do that*. Therefore, your *love* is no better than a wretched Gentile's *love*. Therefore, if you want to get the *reward* of God, you should *greet* those who are not your *brothers*. Immediately following the Sermon on the Mount, we will encounter Jesus interacting with a Roman centurion, and not only greeting him, but heaping praise upon him, and calling him great because of his faith.

Biblical Text

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?