

Intro

We've all encountered difficult people. Who is it for you? Maybe it's the acquaintance who's always putting you down. Or the hostile co-worker that treats you like a child. Or a sibling who's always trying to outdo you. Maybe it's the in-law who's trying to run your life. Or a person close to you who's always speaking hurtful words. Or it's the person who mocks your faith and flaunts their immorality. Maybe it's the politician or political activist that's seeking to take away your religious freedoms.

Whatever your case, we all struggle to love certain people. They drive us crazy. They anger us. They grieve us. They wound us. They oppose us. They make life difficult. And our natural inclination is to fight back. We want to tell them what we think of them. Maybe you're even tempted to violence. At the very least we want to avoid them. But Jesus calls us to love them. This morning Jesus tell us...

BIG IDEA: Imitate God the Father by loving your enemies

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

Jesus has reached his 6th and final statement on the insufficient righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Point 1: The Father loves his enemies by doing good to them (5:43-45)

Explanation

What was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy," was not actually written in the OT. What was being taught in Jesus' is more interpretation than direct OT teaching. What was said was this:

Leviticus 19:17-18 "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Leviticus was erroneously applied to mean your neighbor must be loved, but your enemy must be hated. If a person was your enemy, they didn't qualify as a neighbor. Again, Jesus raises the standard: even enemies should be loved. Even our persecutors should be prayed for. But why should we love our enemies and pray for our persecutors? "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." So that indicates the purpose of loving our enemies and praying for them. We love our enemies and pray for them so that we may be sons of the Father. Not everyone is a son of the Father. Elsewhere, the apostle John speaks of two categories of people, children of God and children of the devil:

1 John 3:10 By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

John believes that our practice reveals who we belong to. Jesus is saying something similar, but he's saying it in a more forceful way: we love our enemies so that we'll be saved. "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" is shorthand for saved. If you're God's children, you're saved. So if we're saved by faith alone, not our works, how can Jesus command us to love our enemies so that we'll be saved?

Well, we have to do two things. First, we need to understand the context of Jesus' discussion. Second, we need to understand conversion. In context, Jesus is correcting the practice of the scribes and Pharisees. Earlier, Jesus said this:

Matthew 5:20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

In other words, if your devotion to God is like the scribes and Pharisees you're not God's children. The spirituality of the scribes and Pharisees came up short. Jesus was basically saying, "if you follow the practices of the scribes and Pharisees, like hating your enemies, you'll wind up just like them, excluded from the kingdom of heaven." Jesus is showing his followers a better way: loving our enemies.

Coming to Jesus, being saved, isn't just about believing facts about God and sin. Yes, we have to believe certain facts to be saved. We believe that God is the Creator of and ruler over all that exists. We also believe that God is holy. We believe what he says about sin. And we believe what he says about us: we're sinners in need of God's mercy. We believe that only the finished work of Christ can remove our guilt and provide forgiveness. Yes, we believe all these things. But there's more. Being convinced of these things changes our outlook on life. We have a new attitude towards sin. It's rebellion. It's destructive. It's shameful. And we have a new attitude towards God. He's good. He's merciful. He's trustworthy. He cares. All his ways are good. And convictions shape actions. This is repentance: following Jesus because our attitude towards God and sin has changed. Faith and repentance are inseparably connected. Faith drives us to follow.

ILLUSTRATION: what we believe about the Coronavirus shapes our response to it

And Jesus is calling his hearers to follow him rather than the scribes and Pharisees. There is an evangelistic thrust here. Will you follow me in loving your enemies? Or will you reject me and continue hating your enemies? And if they follow Jesus they will be saved. When we follow Jesus, we do so because we believe his words are true and right. Think of it like this, we follow because we believe. Following occurs after faith. It's not that we earn salvation by following, as if our own merit earns forgiveness. Jesus doesn't allow for a category where people can be saved by doing good apart from faith. He says, "apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5)." No, faith comes first and then good works. In short, loving our enemies and praying for them is a fruit of our faith in Jesus, not good works that merit our salvation. After all, who could follow Jesus in loving their enemies without faith?

Having instructed his followers to love their enemies, Jesus explains why this is appropriate. "For" indicates the reason. God the Father gives sun and rain to both the evil and the good. Sun and rain are provisions necessary for growing crops. Even though the unjust reject God, God still blesses them. In other words, God himself loves his enemies by tangibly blessing them. Likewise, when we care for our enemies we imitate the Father and show ourselves to be his children.

This illustrates the doctrine that theologians call common grace:

Universal blessings that God provides for everyone, believer and unbeliever alike. Besides sun and rain, other examples include medical and scientific discoveries, food to enjoy, artistic ability and enjoyment, athletic ability and enjoyment, human government, the family unit, and the conscience. God has blessed the human race in variety of ways, revealing his benevolence.

Application

Jesus instructs us to love our enemies tangibly. Not just endure them, like turning the other cheek. How do we love our brothers and sisters in Christ? We invite them into our homes, we share food with them, we help them out when it is in our power to do so, we give them a listening ear, we encourage, we challenge, we advise, and we bear with their faults. It's what the deacons do for people inside and outside the church. Love is tangible. It acts. It isn't just a feeling we keep to ourselves.

I'm assuming that we struggle to love our enemies. Jesus is calling us to do something that is impossible if left to ourselves. We could never save ourselves by loving our enemies. Because we could never even love our enemies to begin with apart from the Holy Spirit.

Jesus connects prayer for our enemies with love for them. God graciously provides us with prayer to help us fight the urge to hate our enemies. In prayer we call on God to do the impossible. One of those impossible things is changing our heart so that we love our enemies. Connected to God in prayer, we ask God to help us do what we can't without him. And praying for our enemies reorients our priorities. We're reminded that God's purpose isn't our ease and convenience. No, he calls us to do what is hard: loving our enemies. Just like Jesus. He endured the shame and physical agony for his enemies, for us.

One word of caution. Criticizing sinful behavior isn't failure to love. If so, Jesus violated his own teaching. For example, in Matthew 23 Jesus scolded the scribes and Pharisees. What can we conclude? Sometimes confronting sin is the loving thing to do. When our brothers and sisters are falling into destructive habits, the loving thing is to challenge them and encourage repentance. If someone's a drug addict, it isn't loving to leave them alone.

Young people. I have a question for you. Whose teachings are you following? It matters because who we follow determines our eternal dwelling! Jesus warns that following the scribes and the Pharisees will bar you from heaven. But following Jesus will make you the Father's children. It can be said that our eternal destiny will be determined by who we follow. Our culture, whether through movies or social media or even the news, tells us who to follow. You will be tempted to follow someone or something. Maybe it's a celebrity entertainer (like a singer) or a blogger or a political activist or a group of peers. Maybe it's an ideology or a pleasure or materialism. You will follow someone or something. Today Jesus says to you, "follow me." Ultimately your choice will be simple. You will either choose to follow Jesus or you will choose to follow someone or something else. This brings us to a second point.

Point 2: Imitating societal norms is not enough (5:46-47)

Explanation

Jesus provides a second reason why we should love our enemies: if we only love those who love us we are no different than the vilest sinners. We're no better than a tax collector. Jesus was being provocative. The tax collector was a hated enemy. In other words, if you hate your enemies, you're no different than the people you despise. You're just like them. It would be like saying to a group of conservative evangelicals, if you fail

to love political activists that are seeking to take away your Christian freedoms, you're no different than an ungodly political activist. Even ungodly activists love people who love them.

Tax collectors were despised because they were considered both a traitor and a thief. They were private contractors who paid Roman authorities for the right to collect taxes. Their rights included ability to impound goods when they suspected the goods hadn't been declared for taxation and confiscating flocks that used public pasture. They were traitors because they worked for the Roman Empire that occupied Israel. And they were thieves because they charged more than required in order to keep the extra for themselves. Because they worked for the enemy and stole from their countrymen, they were despised sinners.

In another provocative statement, warmly greeting only your brothers is no better than Gentile behavior. In the Jewish mind, the Gentiles were those unclean, immoral, godless people who were excluded from God's blessing. If you fail to love your enemies, you are just like godless, immoral people.

Jesus is trying to shock us. He's linking failure to love our enemies with godless immorality. If our love has boundary markers, we're no different than our godless neighbors. Doing what everyone else does isn't good enough. Kingdom citizens are called to a higher standard. Put another way, how can we be a light to the world if we hate our enemies?

Application

Young people, will you simply go along with the culture and imitate their morality, or will you heed the higher standard Jesus sets for his people? Jesus is calling us to a higher standard.

Point 3: The Father's character is the standard we strive after (5:48)

Explanation

Jesus now reaches the conclusion of 5:21-48. Note the therefore. Our standard is this: "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In other words, imitate the holiness of God the Father. Perfect, because it's describing God himself, means fully developed, or not lacking, in a moral sense. God cannot be tempted with evil (Jas 1:13), God cannot dwell with evil (Ps 5:4), and God cannot delight in evil (Ps 5:4). Because he is perfectly holy. Because there is no deficiency in him. Because he is holy by nature. And this is the standard we must emulate: God's holiness. Jesus says to us, "do you see the character of God the Father? Well, this is the standard you must strive after." In other words, Jesus is calling us to an impossible and unattainable standard. So what we have here is a goal to strive after. Not a level of morality that we could actually attain. We could never be morally perfect in every way like God the Father.

Application

So how should we respond to an impossible standard? First, Jesus is saying try. Make an effort. He's charging us to live in a certain way. To love our enemies. He's not saying, "after all, you're all sinners so why bother." He's not saying, "you're forgiven so don't really worry about it. Being forgiven is what really matters." He's not saying, "some things are too hard and can't ever be overcome." No, he's saying, "strive to reach the standard of your Father's perfect holiness. Strive to love your enemies. That is the goal you must work towards." He's telling us that God holds us responsible to love our enemies. He's expecting we will make every effort to love our enemies. He's expecting that we will grow spiritually and become more like the Father. We can make progress in loving our enemies.

Second, we should be realistic about what is actually achievable. Can we attain the moral perfection of the Father in this life? No. Can we reach a point in this life where our sin nature has been eradicated? No. Our glorification in imperishable bodies occurs at the return of Christ. Sin won't exist in the new heavens and

new earth because the curse will be gone. But that's not the case in this life. So what's realistic for us in this life? Greater conformity to the Father's character. Greater victory over sin. Because, by the Spirit's work in us we can kill sin in our lives (Rom 8:13). Hatred, or even indifference to enemies, can be replaced with love for them. Jesus calls us to be like our heavenly Father, which implies growth and victory over sin is possible. But he doesn't expect that we will attain moral perfection.

How does this inform our life as a church? Growth is the goal that we should be working towards together. We should be encouraging one another to love those difficult people in our lives. We should be praying together for our enemies. And since we're all battling sin, we must be ready to forgive and bear with one another. We must be willing to overlook offenses. Like we'd want our brothers and sisters to overlook our offenses. The goal isn't convincing everyone I'm perfect. The goal is growing to be more like Christ, and helping others to be more like Christ.

In short, the right attitude towards growth is working hard for it and expecting it, but never thinking we've arrived and we don't need God.

Young people, the standard is who God is, not what I see others doing. Whether on tv, on the internet, at work, or at school, you will be tempted to follow bad models. Jesus calls you to follow the Father's example. This is your goal. God graciously provides us with the Father's example to show us a model for loving our enemies.

Conclusion

Imitate God the Father by loving your enemies. We've learned that **the Father loves his enemies by doing good to them.** That **imitating societal norms is not enough.** And that **the Father's character is the standard we strive after.** So bring your hatred to the Father. And pray for your enemies. And strive after love in the strength that God supplies.