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Matthew 5:43 - 5:48



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg delves into Matthew 5:43-48, where Jesus illustrates God's attitude towards the law and righteousness. Jesus challenges the common belief of hating enemies and emphasizes the importance of loving one's enemies, citing the example of a Samaritan who helped a Jewish man. Gregg highlights the idea that true perfection lies in loving not only one's neighbors but also one's enemies. He emphasizes that loving enemies is an essential aspect of mercy and salvation, which meets the conditions of repentance and faith.

Transcript

In this session, we will be looking at the last example in Matthew 5, which Jesus gives to illustrate God's attitude toward the law and toward what really righteousness is, what God wants from man in order that man be righteous. The law of the Old Testament was recognized by the Jews as a disclosure of God's attitude toward what is right and wrong. Jesus, however, had to expound on that so that his disciples would understand what the law really meant.

What did the law mean? It meant that God wanted us to be just. It meant that God wanted us to be merciful. It meant that God wants us to be faithful.

In other words, all of these things are just another way of saying God wants us to be loving. He wants us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Jesus gives six illustrations of this in the closing section of Matthew 5, and we come to the last of those now.

In Matthew 5, 43 through 48, which I will now read, Jesus said, And you have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. That you may be sons of your Father in heaven, for he makes his Son to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors

do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. Now, Jesus is expounding on what the disciples had heard taught by their Jewish rabbis in the synagogues. That teaching essentially boiled down to this, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

Now, the statement, You shall love your neighbor, was indeed part of what the Old Testament law taught. God said that in Leviticus 19, 18, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. And we have already observed, and most Christians are aware, that Jesus indicated that loving your neighbor as you love yourself is essentially what God wants you to do in every case.

Now, the question was, What is a neighbor? Once a lawyer asked Jesus, You know, What is the great commandment? And Jesus said, Well, the great commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. And the Bible says that the lawyer wanted to justify himself, and so he said, Who is my neighbor? Now, what this means is, he wanted to justify the fact that he didn't love everybody. Although he was commanded to love his neighbor, he hoped that maybe the word neighbor could be restricted somewhat narrowly, and it would not have to include the people he doesn't automatically love.

So he said, Who is my neighbor? And Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. We don't have to tell the story now. Everyone knows that this man was, he fell among thieves.

He was a Jewish man. He was beaten up and robbed. A couple of Jewish religious, a Levite and a priest came by and ignored him, would not help him.

Then came a Samaritan. Now, a Samaritan was a man of another country who had very poor relations with the Jewish people. As a matter of fact, the Jews hated the Samaritans.

But this Samaritan found a man, a Jewish man, injured and robbed and helped him in practical ways. He bound up his wounds. He put him on his own animal, took him to a hostel and paid for him to stay there and fed him.

And Jesus said, Which of these men who found the man in this condition was a neighbor to him? And Jesus, you know, the person Jesus was talking to said, Well, he that had mercy on him. And Jesus said, You go and do likewise. Now, the point of Jesus' parable was this.

The Bible says, the Old Testament says, Love your neighbor as you love yourself. The lawyer said, Well, who is my neighbor? Jesus pointed out that here is a man, here are two men, a Samaritan and a Jew, who ordinarily would be seen as enemies of one another. And yet the one saw, the Samaritan saw the Jewish man injured and in need,

and he saw that as his neighbor whom he should help.

So Jesus' answer was essentially, Your neighbor is whoever is needy. He could even be somebody who is your enemy. So this is how Jesus taught on the passage in Leviticus 19.18. You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Your neighbor includes your enemies. Your neighbor isn't just your friends. Your neighbor is anyone who shares this planet with you who happens to be in need, and you're in a position to help them.

If you don't, then you don't love your neighbor, and you are violating the commandment. Now, the way the rabbis had taught it, clearly, it was wrong. In Matthew 5.43, it says, You have heard it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

Now, the second part, hate your enemy, was never commanded in Scripture. There's no Old Testament verse that says, You shall hate your enemy. There certainly are examples in the Old Testament of persons who hated their enemies.

There are examples of times when God actually commanded the Jews to annihilate whole populations of wicked people, and one might have deduced from that that God wants them to hate their enemies. Now, in saying, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, Jesus is, first of all, quoting, for the first time in this whole passage, something not from the law. Everything else he has quoted when he says, You have heard that it was said, was actually something that the law did say.

But now he addresses something where the law was grossly misunderstood. The Scripture had said, Love your neighbor, but the rabbis had said, This neighbor does not mean your enemy. You must hate your enemy.

You must hate the Gentiles. You must hate the Romans who occupy the land of Israel and keep us from being a free people. This is what the rabbis taught.

Now, Jesus said, No, these rabbis are wrong. God wants you to love your neighbor, and your enemy is a neighbor also. He may not be a good neighbor, but he's a neighbor nonetheless.

So, Jesus said, I say to you, Love your enemies. Why? Well, you're supposed to love your neighbor. Your enemy is one of your neighbors, so love your enemies as well.

The rabbis said, Hate your enemies. I say, Love your enemies. And then he continued, Bless those who curse you.

Do good to those who hate you. And pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. Now, some of this isn't found in every Bible.

If you are using a modern translation, it may be that some of these words are left out.

And the reason is because in some manuscripts, this verse is much more brief. And Jesus only says to love your enemies and bless those who curse you.

And a few other lines there. But the text, followed by the King James Version and the New King James Version, which the latter is what I'm reading, has all of these words in it. Now, because the manuscripts differ, some may wonder whether Jesus really said all of these things.

And some of the manuscripts leave out a few of the phrases. But if you'd look over at Luke 6, verses 27 and 28, all the manuscripts agree about the contents of these verses. And we have all the elements of that verse here.

Jesus said in Luke 6, 27 and 28, But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. Now, therefore, whether Matthew originally wrote all those words or not, we know Jesus spoke them. Because Luke records them in a place where the texts are not ambiguous.

Now, what's important here is that Jesus says, You must love your enemies. If somebody curses you, you must bless them. If somebody hates you, you must do good to them.

If someone uses you or abuses you wrongly and persecutes you, you must pray for them. In other words, you must respond to those who are hostile toward you in an exactly opposite spirit. The fact that somebody is your enemy does not mean that you now have an excuse to hate them.

The fact that somebody has cursed you does not mean that you have the right to curse them back. Or if somebody has wronged you, that you have the right to do harm to them. The opposite is true.

You're supposed to do good to those who mistreat you. Now, someone might say, Well, that certainly is a change in ethics from the Old Testament, where Jesus says, Do good to your enemies, and so on and so forth. But it really isn't a change at all.

The Old Testament actually commanded the same thing. It didn't command it quite as frequently as we find it in the teaching of Jesus. But it is certainly there.

I don't have time to go into all the passages. But there is a law, for example, that says that if you are a Hebrew, or Jew, and you see the ox of your neighbor who hates you wandering around, you shall take it back to him. Even though it belongs to someone who hates you, you see his ox wandering around, you take it back to him.

He said, If you see the donkey of a man who is your enemy fallen under its load, you shall lift it up and help him out, even though he's your enemy. Now, that's in the law of Moses. That's in Exodus.

Likewise, in the book of Proverbs, it says, If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If your enemy is thirsty, give him drink. So we can see that the Old Testament also spoke about doing good to those who hate you and loving your enemies.

Jesus did not introduce this from scratch. He was basically trying to restore it. It was an original teaching of the law.

But the rabbis had taught, You don't need to love your enemies. And this they were really wrong about, and Jesus needed to clarify that, so his disciples might not think that they should follow the law as they were taught it in the synagogues, but that they should follow the law as God originally gave it. Now, Jesus said that when you behave in this way toward those who hate you and those who curse you and so forth, He says, You should do this so that you may be the sons of your Father in heaven.

For he makes his Son rise on the evil and on the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Now, back in the Beatitudes, earlier in this chapter, Jesus said, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God. Now, Jesus is telling us how to be peaceable, how to be peacemakers.

If somebody hates you, you may be able to win them over by loving them. If somebody curses you, you may be able to win them over by blessing them, by doing good to them. If someone persecutes you, you might be able to win them over by doing good to them and praying for them.

In other words, if you respond in a different spirit, they may see that there is something true about what you profess to believe and that you are indeed a different kind of person than they are and that you have been changed by the grace of God and that the Spirit of God produces love in you even when He would expect to find the opposite response in you. Now, that being the case, you may be able to help somebody to become a Christian by doing good to them, but even if you cannot, you should do good to them simply because that's your nature, because children have the nature of their father. And Jesus said, do these things so that you might be children of your Father.

And He gives the example of how the Father Himself behaves this way. The Father sends His rain on the farms of good people and bad people. The Father causes the sun to rise on the evil and on the just, that is, those who are friendly toward God and those who are rebels against God.

Now, God is not equally good to all people because there definitely are, and the Bible teaches this, special blessings that God confers on those who are His friends, those who are the righteous. But there are some common graces that God pours out on people indiscriminately, that is to say, two farmers whose farms are next to each other will receive rain on the same day even if one of them is a godly man and the other is an ungodly man. God is generous even to those who are not His people, even to those who

could be called His enemies in some way as God shows kindness to them.

So Jesus is saying, you need to be like your Father. You need to show kindness to those who are your enemies, to those who will not be grateful to you, because then you will exhibit the traits of your Father and show yourselves to be the sons of your Father, or you'll be peacemakers and therefore be called the sons of God. Now, Jesus indicated that there's no special congratulations do you, if you're nice to people who are nice to you, or if you love people who love you.

He said, if you love those who love you, what reward have you? The indication is there's no reward do you. He says even the tax collectors do the same, and when He mentions the tax collectors, in that society the tax collectors were the most morally compromised people He could think of, apart from prostitutes, and sometimes He'd mention those two together. Tax collectors and prostitutes are often mentioned together as the epitome of the most depraved, the most morally compromised people in that society.

So when Jesus said, if you love only those who love you, even the tax collectors love those who love them, He's saying you're not religious, you're not righteous in any exceptional degree if you love those who love you, because even those who have no religion, even those who have the greatest moral compromises in their lives, and no one would mistake them for being people who are right with God, even they do that much. Therefore, when the Bible says love your neighbor, it means that you do more than what the tax collectors do, who clearly are not on good terms with God. You are to love neighbors that they would not love.

You're supposed to love enemies as well as friends. He says also, if you only greet your brethren, that is, again, if you only show politeness or kindness to those who are your friends and those that you like, He says you don't do any more than the tax collectors do. In which case, of course, you cannot think yourself to be in any better position with God than they are.

It seems to be what He's saying. If God wants you to love your neighbor, He wants you to love your neighbor more than the tax collectors do, and that means you're going to have to love people whom the tax collectors would not love. They love their friends, but you need to love your enemies as well.

And He says then, therefore you shall be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect. Now, perfection here, I think, can easily be misunderstood. For one thing, the Greek word that's here translated perfection can mean just what we mean by it, flawless.

As good as it can be, perfect. That is a good translation of the Greek word. However, the same Greek word also has some other meanings.

It can mean complete. It can mean total. And in some contexts, the same word means

mature.

So, I mean, what is the meaning here? When Jesus says, be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect, does He mean be mature as your Father in heaven is mature? Does He mean be complete as your Father in heaven is complete? Or does He mean flawless and sinless as your Father is flawless and sinless? Well, this last position is that which is taken by many. And they teach something that's called Christian perfection. They believe that you can come to a point of sinless perfection in this life.

Well, whether you can or not, that is not what Jesus is teaching here. And I can say that on pretty good authority because Jesus' words that are found in this place have their parallel in another place. And it's very clear there what He is saying.

And that's something that we would do well to look at. Over in Luke chapter 6, Jesus, you know, this is the same sermon or at least one very much like it. And we have here essentially the same point being made and only a few words are a little different.

For example, in Luke chapter 6, I think you'll recognize the similarity here. In verse 32, Jesus said, But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

And if you lend to them from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. And now He says this in Luke 6, 35, But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return. And your reward will be great, and you will be the sons of the highest.

For He, meaning God, is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Now you can see immediately this is the same teaching.

He tells us to be kind not only to those who are kind to us, love enemies, and so forth and so on. He mentions that God Himself is kind even to the unthankful and the evil. These thoughts are in both passages.

But where Matthew's passage ends with the statement, Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect, it's worded this way in Luke, Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Now you might say, well these are different concepts. Perfection is one thing, mercy is another.

But if we take perfection to mean complete, Be perfect, it can be translated as be complete. And by this He means be complete in your mercy. Be complete in your love.

Don't just show mercy to those who show mercy to you. Don't just love those who love you. Be like your Father.

He shows mercy to people who don't love Him. He shows mercy to people who are unthankful. And therefore you need to be like Him.

Merciful, as He is merciful. Complete or perfect in mercy, just as He is. The idea is that all men love some people.

All men are merciful towards some people. But you need to be merciful completely to all people. You need to love all people, all your neighbors, not just your friends, but also your enemies.

In so doing you will resemble your Father, for He is merciful, or He is complete in His mercy like that. So you should be complete or perfect or totally merciful. Indiscriminately merciful, as it were.

Just as your Father is. Now, when we say that God or that we should be indiscriminately merciful, that doesn't mean in all respects. Because God doesn't show His ultimate mercy of salvation to all people.

His mercy is to those who fear Him. His mercy is to those who will turn from their sins and repent and believe in Him. His mercy of salvation, in other words, is to those who meet the conditions of repentance and faith.

But even to those who do not do that, although He does not extend every mercy to them that He extends to the believer, He does not, for example, save those who do not repent and believe, yet He does show kindness to them. He does show some kindness to them. He gives them opportunities to repent, for one thing.

That's a great kindness. But more than that, He blesses their lives. There are people who do not love God, who are very prosperous, who are very healthy, who have very happy lives.

Sometimes that bothers Christians. David himself wondered sometimes why the wicked prosper. But Jesus said it's just because God is merciful.

He's merciful across the board. He shows some kindness to everybody. But if you want the ultimate mercy from God, then you must come on His terms.

He will show some mercy to you, but His goodness is intended to lead you to repentance. If you will repent and turn to Christ and follow Him, then you'll have more than just general mercies. You will have the mercy that God extends to those who love Him, which is that He will give you eternal life, that you will dwell forever with Him.

We are to extend the same mercy to others that God extends to us. If we have been forgiven, we must forgive others. Remember, Jesus said, Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

We need to be the merciful ones. These last two illustrations in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus gives about the law, the one about you've heard an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, but I say don't resist, turn the other cheek, and so forth. And then this one right here, where you need to love your enemies and do good to people who hurt you.

These two illustrations are very similar to each other. They both have to do with being merciful to those who don't really deserve mercy, those who are unkind to us. Really what they deserve is to have us respond in kind, but that's not what we're supposed to do.

We're supposed to be like Jesus. Those who killed Jesus deserve to die themselves, but Jesus said, Father, forgive them. They don't know what they do.

Jesus extended the mercy of God to those who were unkind to him, and he tells us to do the same. In this, we can resemble God more. We can show ourselves to be his children and bear that family resemblance, because God is merciful to all, though, as I say, his ultimate mercy is to those who come to him through faith in Jesus Christ, repenting of their sins and surrendering their whole lives to him.

Then the ultimate mercy of salvation can be had.