

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Well And Play So Poorly

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

Love Your Enemies

June 12th, 2022

Matthew 5:43-48

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I would love for you to open it now to Matthew 5:43-48. As I mentioned last Sunday, these two paragraphs here – stretching from verse 38 through to verse 48 – together represent the HIGH-WATER MARK of the Sermon on the Mount, in terms of its ethical teaching. In the next paragraph we will enter into a new section – in chapter 6 the emphasis shifts from ETHICS to PIETY – so this is the CLIMAX of what Jesus has to say about how we should LIVE as the people of God in the world.

I mentioned last week that when you compare the ethical teaching of the world’s major religions there is a fair bit of overlap. Most religions say that it is bad to seduce your neighbour’s spouse; most religions say that children should honour and obey their parents’ most religions say something about the importance of respecting personal property. So, there is a TON of OVERLAP – maybe 70% overlap – in terms of the ethical teaching of all the major world religions. But in these two paragraphs, Jesus really begins to leave all the other religious systems behind. Jesus is saying things HERE that nobody else was saying. We are entering into the parts of the Christian ethical system that are absolutely UNIQUE.

So, I hope you brought your oxygen tank and your safety harness today because we are climbing up into some high and heady territory.

Just saying that makes me realize, that we should probably begin with prayer. Let's do that, let's pray together:

“Heavenly Father, we ask for your help today in the hearing and receiving of your Word. Lord I ask for your help today. This was an usual week for me. I don't feel as prepared as I would like to be. I don't feel adequate for a topic of this magnitude. So I ask Lord that the Holy Spirit would be working inside human hearts to take hold of Divine Truths as they are presented to us in the pages of Holy Scripture. And I ask that today in Jesus' name, amen.”

Alright, let's hear now together from God's holy, inspired, inerrant and infallible Word, starting at verse 43:

“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 makes his sun 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 do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:43–48 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

As we've been making our way through this middle section of the Sermon on the Mount we've been talking again and again about how Jesus is RAISING the BAR here in terms of what it means to be righteous. If we are going to be SALT and LIGHT in the world then we can't just DO whatever the world does and we can't just AGREE with whatever standards and behaviours the world adopts and endorses. We have to maintain a different standard – we have to aspire to the standard set by God.

In terms of structure this morning, I want to keep things simple. We'll talk about where the religious leaders of the day had placed the old bar; we'll talk about where Jesus puts the new bar, and we'll end by asking the question: how in the world are we ever going to do this. Let's begin then with the old bar.

Where Was The Old Bar?

In verse 43 Jesus says:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ (Matthew 5:43 ESV)

Now, of course, if you are a Bible reader you know that there is no such verse anywhere in the Old Testament, so how in the world did the Jewish leaders of the day arrive at this very low and unimpressive ethical standard? The commentaries tend to be very helpful here; D.A. Carson says for example that:

“Some Jews took the word “neighbor” to be exclusive: we are to love *only* our neighbors, they thought, and therefore we are to hate our enemies.”¹

Another commentator provides some further nuancing; he says:

“They seized on the immediate context of the inconvenient command to love the neighbour, pointing out that Leviticus 19 is addressed ‘to all the congregation of the people of Israel’.”²

Are you seeing that? Are you seeing how easy it is for people who LOVE the BIBLE and who STUDY the Bible to MISS what the Bible is actually saying? This is why it is so hard to argue with the cults because they say that what they believe is coming out of the Bible – but generally speaking they are reading the Bible POORLY and SELECTIVELY. That’s how you get a cult – and that’s how you get jaw dropping misinterpretations like the one Jesus is arguing against here.

Can we just stop and be humbled by that?

Can we just stop and acknowledge how easy it is to see what we want to see in the Bible and to justify what we want to believe from the Bible? It is so easy to start with what we already believe and to stop reading the Bible once we’ve seen something that confirms us in our pre-existing bias.

That’s what was happening here!

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 52.

² John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount, The Bible Speaks Today*; Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 115.

The Pharisees WANTED to believe that they were free to hate people outside their little circle and so they were looking for the LIMITS and the LOOPHOLES in the law. The law said to love your neighbour – but who is my neighbour, really? You know, there are only 4 other houses in my village that are technically adjacent to my house, therefore there are a lot of people that I am free to despise at my leisure.

That's the kind of NONSENSE you can justify if you are reading the Bible POORLY and SELECTIVELY through the lens of your pre-existing bias. You see what you want to see and then you stop looking. That's what the Pharisees did – they seized on a questionable interpretation of ONE passage and they failed to account for the straightforward interpretation of other passages – passages like Exodus 23:4-5 which says:

“If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. ⁵ If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.” (Exodus 23:4–5 ESV)

Friends – what is that passage saying? It is saying pretty much exactly what Jesus is saying here in the Sermon on the Mount. So again Jesus is not being an innovator, he is being a reformer. He is bringing ALL the Bible to bear, not just those passages that confirm us in our pre-existing biases.

The cultural leaders of the day had set the bar as low as it could possibly go. This is basically how animals live, right? Protect the herd, EAT everyone else. This is BASIC INSTINCT. This is TRIBAL ETHIC – and Jesus says, NO. We're not going to live life at the level of the lowest common denominator. What credit is it to you if you love those who love you? What credit is it to you if you are nice to your family and to your tribe? Tax collectors do that! Gentiles do that! DOGS do that! And the people of God need to be known for more than that.

So Jesus rejects the old bar, but where does he put the new bar?

Where Did Jesus Put The New Bar?

We get the new bar in verses 44-45 – and again it is framed antithetically. “You have heard what the Pharisees think; you have heard the standard of the day:”

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:44–45 ESV)

The new bar is the PERFECT love of God! That’s the punchline that Jesus gives at the end of this section in verse 48:

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48 ESV)

Now the Greek word used there for PERFECT actually means complete or whole, so the implication is that the definition of LOVE provided by the cultural leaders of the day was incomplete; it was not whole; it was leaving many people out. The love of God, our Father and our Creator, on the other hand is indiscriminate, in terms of his general benevolence: He makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good alike. He sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. That’s your bar, Jesus says, what theologians call the common grace of God. I want you to love like that; showing kindness, mercy and generosity to all people without distinction.

That’s the essence of the passage. Jesus is WIDENING the CIRCLE of the people we are required to love. John Stott says helpfully here:

“Our ‘neighbour’ in the vocabulary of God includes our enemy. What constitutes him our neighbour is simply that he is a fellow human being in need, whose need we know and are in a position in some measure to relieve.”³

Now what does that sound like to you? It sounds like the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is simply a Jesus’ authorized illustration of this principle. You remember this story perhaps from Sunday School. A guy is walking along the road between Jerusalem and Jericho when is attacked and brutally beaten by robbers who leave him battered and bruised on the side of the road. A priest came by, but he didn’t do anything to help him - he didn’t feel obligated and besides, had he touched the man he would have become ceremonially unclean. A Levite passed by and he didn’t do anything to help him – he was in a hurry and besides, this man was from another tribe. Finally a Samaritan came along – and even though the Jews HATED the Samaritans – and the Samaritans hated them back – he had pity on the man and

³ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 118.

he picked him up, put him on his own donkey, carried him to the nearest inn, put him up in a room, he bandaged and cleaned out his wounds and he left money with the inn keeper so that he could recover and convalesce at his leisure. Jesus tells that story and then he says to the man whose question occasioned the story:

Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:36–37 ESV)

Are you seeing that? Jesus told that story to answer the question: WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

The leaders of the day were trying to SHRINK their circle of obligation. The Bible says you've got to love your neighbour so they wanted a definition of NEIGHBOUR that was about 4 houses wide – and Jesus is pushing that circle out as far as it can possibly go. He is saying your neighbour is ANYONE IN NEED. It doesn't matter who they are, it doesn't matter what tribe they come from, it doesn't matter if you are related to them, it doesn't matter if they are your friend, it doesn't matter if they hate you and might even want to kill you. If you want to be SONS of the Father then you need to love like the Father loves.

"For God so loved **the world**, that he gave his only Son, that **whoever** believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

That's the GOSPEL! That's THE BAR and that's the WITNESS that the people of God are commissioned to give.

Now because we are the people of God and not actually God our reach will never be as LONG as God's reach is, but our hands must always be as OPEN as God's hands are. Let me put up that quote from Stott again; I want you to hear the pastoral wisdom in how he frames this. He says:

"Our 'neighbour' in the vocabulary of God includes our enemy. What constitutes him our neighbour is simply that he is a fellow human being in need, whose need we know and are in a position in some measure to relieve."⁴

⁴ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 118.

Isn't that helpful? Your job is to love everyone without distinction – not to love everyone without exception. Because you can't. Because you are a finite creature imitating an infinite God. So the bar has to do with WIDTH not REACH.

Now, to be clear, I'm talking about love in terms of ACTION here not SENTIMENT. In the Bible the emphasis is always on ACTION. The Good Samaritan did not just FEEL CONCERN for the man on the side of the road, he TOOK ACTION. But he could only do that because he was there! He couldn't have done that for a man on the side of the road in Egypt.

Do you see that?

My friends, part of the reason that people are so stressed out today is that because of the internet and cable news we KNOW about NEEDS in the world that we are INCAPABLE of addressing in any sort of meaningful way. We hear about the refugees in the Ukraine, we hear about the persecuted Christians in Sudan, we hear about the brutality in North Korea, we hear about the tyranny in mainland China – and we feel overwhelmed by that because there isn't really all that much we can do – but thankfully, the Good Samaritan Parable and the teaching here in the Sermon on the Mount is calling for an approach to LOVE that lives much closer to home. He is saying that in our day-to-day interactions, with the people we meet and encounter in real life, we are to love and to bless as far and wide as God Almighty, who:

“makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”
(Matthew 5:45 ESV)

That's the new bar – and of course, it was the original bar as well, in the Old Testament, though it had been denied and obscured by the leaders of the day.

Now as we said last week, identifying the peak of Christian ethics is wonderful, it's marvellous, but how in the world can we be expected to achieve or even approach such a lofty standard? That's where I want to end today. I just a very practical question: how in the world are we ever actually going to do this?

How Are We Going To Do This?

I want to try and give you two answers to that question and the first one is by far the most important. We can only scale this exalted summit – we can only approach this LOFTY STANDARD with the help and by the that God supplies.

1. By the grace that God supplies

There is no way that you can love like this in your own power. Now, to be clear, I'm not saying that unsaved people can't love others – of course they can! And of course they do! They love those who love them back; they love the people in their tribe; they love the people in their family and they love their friends.

You don't have to be a Christian to love like that.

You can get that far up the mountain just on common grace and basic decency – but to get this high up? To love like this? To love people who hate you? To love people who persecute you? To love people who may want to kill you? Well, for that you are going to need the grace that God supplies – amen? Amen – and thankfully, that grace is available to us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 5 that:

“God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”
(Romans 5:5 ESV)

According to the Bible, when you become a Christian you receive a new heart and you are immediately FILLED with the indwelling Holy Spirit – and the Holy Spirit immediately opens up a communication channel between YOU and your heavenly Father. It's like swallowing a cell phone that constantly auto dials one number. Paul talks about that in Galatians 4, he says:

“God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6 ESV)

So when you become a Christian there is a Spirit in you now that immediately begins to reach out to God as Father. And he begins to download grace, wisdom and LOVE FROM THE FATHER such that you begin to grow and change into the likeness of Jesus Christ. He downloads and installs THE JESUS CODE. And that code teaches you how to live and act like a Son of the Father.

Isn't that incredible?

Friends, that's how the Gospel works! God GIVES US that which he demands FROM US!

He gives us the SON CODE through the Spirit:

“so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:45 ESV)

Now of course this has got nothing to do with gender, Jesus is using the term “son” here in the sense of “representing and resembling” God LIKE HIM. Jesus is saying that when we learn how to love people the way he loves people, people are going to look at us and say: “You are a chip off the old block! You look just like your Father who is in heaven.”

That's the whole point here friends! This entire section is about RAISING THE BAR so that we can be again the image and likeness of God throughout the world. This is about being salt and light. No is going to be impressed – no one is even going to notice – if we love like the tax collectors, the Gentiles and the BEASTS OF THE FIELD! Oh – but if we could love like God! If we could love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us THEN everyone will see - everyone will know that we are the children of our Father who is in heaven. Praise the Lord!

So that's the first thing – and as I said, that is by the far the most important thing. We can only do this by the grace that God supplies – we can only do this as we GROW in our Gospel graces. But there is a second thing we need to say here and that is that we can only scale these LOFTY heights, if we make the decision today to put one foot in front of the other.

2. By putting one foot in front of the other

Sometimes the problem with these ETHICAL PEAKS in the Sermon on the Mount is that they seem SO FAR removed from the level of our actual behaviour that we despair of ever arriving at the summit or anywhere even close to the summit. We say, “Well that's ok for Jesus and a few of the stud apostles, but for regular folks like me, that's just never going to happen.”

But what's the old saying? Every journey of a thousand miles – begins with a single step. You can do this – by the grace that God supplies you can do this. And listen, that's not me trying to do my best impersonation of Tony Robbins, I'm not blowing smoke at you, I'm blowing the Gospel at you. I'm blowing 2 Peter 1:3 at you. Remember Peter – one of the original hearers of the Sermon on the Mount – that Peter – he said in 2 Peter 1:3 that:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence (2 Peter 1:3 ESV)

So he knew that the Gospel CARRIES WITH IT the necessary power for you to live and love this way. So that's everything we've been saying so far – but then he goes on to say this:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. (2 Peter 1:5–7 ESV)

Do you see that? He said basically, in the Gospel you have incredible POWER – you have great resources. THEREFORE MAKE EVERY EFFORT to DO a bunch of things that will eventually result in your living and manifesting this type of LOVE. Do you see that? Receiving and ACTING have to go together. So YES, this is a GOSPEL WORK but it is a Gospel **WORK!** So to bring this in for a landing today I want to suggest TWO TINY STEPS that you can take this week that will help you begin to make progress toward the standard of God's perfect and all-embracing love. Here are the two steps. The first one is this:

1. Bring someone outside your circle in

Remember the problem with the Pharisees is that they had shrunk the definition of “neighbour” to about 4 houses wide. And Jesus is pushing that circle outwards – so this week I want you to push your circle outwards. Invite somebody IN who is not already in. Have someone over for dinner who isn't already part of your circle. Invite somebody you wouldn't normally associate with. Someone older than you, younger than you, someone with different political views than you, someone you would normally think of as “OTHER”.

Invite them in.

Push your circle out a little bit – that’s all I’m asking.

Train yourself to think of MORE people as friends, loved ones and neighbours. Ask the Lord – speak to the Holy Spirit inside you and say: “Holy Spirit, please give me more of that Jesus Code so that I can be open hearted and open handed toward a wider array of human beings in my community.

That’s the first step. Widen your circle.

And the second step is:

2. Make prayer your default response to hatred and opposition

That’s part of the Jesus Code right? The Gospel of Luke tells us that AS THE ROMAN SOLDIERS were nailing Jesus to the cross he prayed:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34 ESV)

Can you even imagine that? If a government official even looks at us crossways, what do we do? We get a nasty bumper sticker, we put something on Facebook, we write a letter – but do we ever stop and PRAY?!

Man, I stink at this!

When people attack me or oppress me or even inconvenience me my immediate impulses are not entirely sanctified – can I just say that? But I am learning – slowly but surely – as the Jesus Code is downloaded and installed in me – I am learning, to make prayer my default response. I am learning – by one degree of glory to the next – to see people, even my oppressors, even people who say really mean and unkind things about me – as people that God loves and that Satan torments and abuses. I don’t know why they do what they do – they do not know why they do what they do – but I know that the devil is a lion, roaring about in this world seeking whom to devour – and I know that hurt people hurt people. So instead of cursing those who curse me – slowly but surely I am learning to pray. “God have mercy on them! God bring Gospel people into

their lives! God show them kindness! And God, open my eyes in case I've done anything to give offense, for I am a terrible sinner. Lord have mercy!"

Indiscriminate kindness. Boundary busting benevolence and enemy blessing prayer.

This is the way of the cross. This is the way of witness and this is the Word of the Lord.

Oh God, help!

Let's pray together.