



WEEK 2 – LOVE WHO?!

CHECK-IN

How are you? What's one cool thing God has done in your life in the last week? And... today's teaching of Jesus will cover a tough topic, so let's rip the Band-aid off. Do you have an enemy? An arch-nemesis? A Joker to your Batman? A Moriarty to your Holmes? A Roadrunner to your Wiley Coyote?

OPENING PRAYER

God of Compassion, grant us the ability to love as you love, to see others as you see others, even when loving others is difficult.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus had something to say about our "enemies." In fact, this particular teaching from the Sermon the Mount might be the most revolutionary and impactful of the entire thing. Remember, we began our discussion last week talking about how Jesus's teaching was revolutionary for its time, containing things that had never before

been uttered in this history of humanity. But now, 2000 years later, we tend to take its novelty for granted. And yet, if we take these teachings seriously, they can be just as powerful and transformative for us today as they were then, (mostly, because we still struggle with the same things as people did in first century Israel, as we'll see in today's scripture.) After his introduction we looked at last week, (where he started flipping things from the "get go,") he immediately dove into some tough teaching that would have shocked those listening to their core. And one those was a teaching on how to deal with our Wiley Coyotes, (or Roadrunners? Never really understood who was the hero and who was the villain in that cartoon.) We'll dig into this difficult flipped teaching of Jesus today. But first...

Warm-up Question: Have you been reading your daily Bible passage? What has made this difficult? What has been helpful? It's not too late to catch up!

THE INBETWEEN

After the introduction, The Beatitudes, which are beautiful and inspiring and comforting and hopeful, Jesus gets down to business. Now that he's got their attention, he starts calling out the Laws of Moses they'd adhered to for a thousand years. He starts challenging human nature. He starts flipping everything they know. And you can just hear the crowd thinking, "umm, this isn't as 'feel-good' as the intro, Jesus. Go back and talk more about how blessed I am." But it's this section that truly highlights just how revolutionary this sermon is.

Take turns reading sections of Matthew, chapter 5, verses 13 through 37.

You're probably thinking, "Thank God Pastor Mike didn't choose some of these to spend a week on." And you'd be right. There's some tough stuff in there, but powerful, too. (Quick note: The teaching on divorce seems harsh at first. But when you look into the law it references and the culture, it's actually a beautiful challenge from Jesus that's actually protecting and supporting women. Ask Pastor Mike about it if you have questions.)

Question 1: Briefly, what in this section catches your attention? Are there lessons from Jesus that you struggle with or find counterintuitive? What would you have thought were you a listener in the crowd, hearing Jesus throwing out these challenges?

SCRIPTURE

There's a teaching device Jesus has begun using in this section. Did you catch it? He begins a section with, "you've heard it said," and then gives a common piece of wisdom, or in the case of a few of these, actual codified laws the Jews were to follow. They knew *this* stuff. This was what they would have heard if they listened to the regular Teachers of the Law down in the synagogue in Capernaum. "Don't murder, don't cheat, don't lie..." The Pharisees taught this stuff.

But what makes this sermon so radical for its day is what Jesus does next. He begins with, “you’ve heard it said...” and gives them the bit of normal teaching. But then he says, “But I tell you” something deeper... and then proceeds to blow their mind. No one taught like this. The Teachers of the Law would preach, “The Scriptures say... The Law of Moses says... The third book of the Pentateuch says...” and then explain it. But Jesus flips it. “Okay, that’s what *they’ll* give you, but I tell you something even more profound... something that isn’t just about following the rules, but rather about following the *heart* of God.” The laws were about instruction and order. They were about *human* ideas of fairness and justice. But what Jesus flips is about love and relationship. It’s about dignity and worth, about our value and *God’s* ideas of fairness.

This is why Jesus’s teaching was so unlike anything they’d ever heard, and also why it is so powerful for us today: Because it’s not about following the rules. Jesus shattered that notion. Instead, it’s about following the *heart of God*. The next “flipped” teaching of Jesus will actually come in two parts. We’ll introduce it today and finish it next week, (yup, cliffhanger,) as it might be the most difficult teaching in the entire sermon.

Read Matthew, chapter 5, verses 43 through 48.

Yup, this one’s a toughy. It should make you cringe a little. It should make you feel a slight twinge of guilt. We’ll get into why in a minute, but let’s start with some first impressions.

Question 2: How's this one hit ya? What emotions does this evoke within you? Are you one that seems to have some struggle with loving your enemies? Or, maybe you're the kind of person who has no enemies? What stands out to you about this passage?

REFLECTION

Jesus uses the same teaching device. He starts with, "You've heard it said..." and then he gives them a big one, "Love your neighbor." Now, this isn't one of the Ten Commandments, but it *is* one that should sound pretty familiar. Where else do you know "Love your neighbor" from? Yup, if we fast-forward 17 chapters, and maybe a few years later, to Matthew 22, Jesus is asked, what is the Greatest Commandment. He gives two responses. First, "love God." And second, "love your neighbor." And so, it's fascinating to ask, if Jesus thinks this is second greatest commandment of all time, why does he feel the need to flip it?

Well, check out what he adds to it: "You've heard it said, love your neighbor... *and hate your enemy.*" Wait, that wasn't in the 2nd Greatest Commandment. See, Jesus is addressing a mentality his fellow Jews had begun to adopt from how they interpreted this command. Namely, "yeah, we're called to love other Hebrews, (our true neighbors,) and in that way we're fulfilling that commandment. But it's us against the world, so, it's okay for us to hate everyone else." And Jesus is saying, "No. The heart of God goes *beyond* that." and so, he flips it. "But I say to you... love your enemies." And you can

almost hear the crowd go, “you want us to love WHO?!” “That Roman soldier who just took away your husband for not paying taxes, that Egyptian who prays to weird gods and tells fortunes, that Samaritan who spat in your face when you walked by, you have to love... ALL... those... people.” “You want us to love WHO?!” Do you see why this would have blown their minds?

But the question is, what does this mean for us? Well, what Jesus is flipping for us is not a law. There’s no law in America that says you have to love or hate anyone. What Jesus is flipping for us is our natural human tendency. We by nature will favor those who favor us and vilify those who don’t. It’s in human nature to love those who love us and push away those who don’t. And so, whereas we might not have a conquering people who oppress us, what we *do* have is a fair number of people who we might consider an “enemy” ... and this is whom Jesus is calling us to love.

Question 3: We asked the question flippantly in the ice-breaker, but let’s look at it more deeply now. When the Scripture was read that said, “love your enemy,” who came to your mind? Who did God lay on your heart that is someone you have a conflict with? (It might just be the coworker who is still your yogurt out of the fridge... but consider it a little more deeply.)

Jesus calls us to love even that person, (yes, even the yogurt thief.) To get at this difficult command, let’s look at the *why* and the *how*. First, the *why*. Why is it important for us to do this? Jesus gives us one

answer in verse 45. He says, it's how we act as "true children of your Father in Heaven." (v45 NLT). If we're following the heart of God, and God's heart is to love ALL God's children, our love should be for all, even our "enemies." And then he gives this cool image: God gives sunlight to the evil and the good. He sends rain on the just and the unjust. Jesus is saying, "love everyone cuz... well... you're no better than anyone else. God is the one who doles out the sun and the rain. So, you just love *everyone* and let God do the sorting later." When we hate, we are passing a judgment we aren't qualified to pass. We're setting ourselves above them, when we aren't qualified to make that call. And Jesus, in his very kind way here, is reminding us, we're no better than anyone else, so, err on the side of love.

Jesus then goes on to give us our second reason why we should love our enemies. In verse 47, where Jesus says, "if you're only kind to your friends," the next phrase in Greek literally says, "how is that *extraordinary*?" (What an awesome line!) Jesus is saying, "if people are going to see God's heart *through you*, you have to be different. You have to be unlike the world. Your love has to be *extraordinary*. Yes, you can show a lot by loving your neighbor. You can show a lot by loving those who love you. But everyone does that. Instead, you can show others *God's heart* by going above and beyond, by loving your enemies, by showing extraordinary love."

Question 4: Consider the person or group who God laid on your heart in the last question. What would it look like for you to show

extraordinary love for that person? How could you practically answer Jesus's call to love them? Could you take that step?

CLOSING

As we said, this might be the most difficult teaching in the entire sermon, which is why we're spending two weeks on it. So, come back next week for more on the *how* of loving your enemy. But, Jesus, in this section, leaves us with one tip. In verse 43, he says, "love your enemies and *pray for those who persecute you.*" Step one, pray for them. No, this is not a prayer to have fire from heaven rain down upon them. It's not even a prayer for them to see the error of their ways and magically become a better person. Those prayers aren't helpful. Sadly, they're not likely to be smote, nor are they likely to change. However, Jesus's command is for *you* to pray for *your heart* to change toward *them*. Jesus knew how difficult loving your enemies can be. So he starts where we should start... within ourselves. Sometimes it takes a softening of our heart in order to show that love. And so, when Jesus says to pray for our enemies, he's suggesting you pray for *your* heart become like the heart of God, that you find within yourself the kind of love for them that Jesus has. If we are called to show others the heart of God, we have to flip our human nature. We have to love those we might call an enemy. And step one? Step one is praying for *our* heart to change toward *them*. And in that way, our extraordinary love will show others the heart of God.

Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations.

Close in prayer.