

The Sermon on the Mount

DEVOTIONAL STUDIES FROM THE
MEN'S MORNING FELLOWSHIP

Matthew 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.'

Matthew 5:44 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,

Matthew 5:45 that you may be sons of your Father 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 5:46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

Matthew 5:47 And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more *than others?* Do not even the tax collectors do so?

Matthew 5:48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

You have heard that it was said... The people **heard** what the teachers of the Law of God **said** about the Scriptures. We must constantly remind ourselves that Jesus was correcting these traditional interpretations of God's Law. The teachers of the Law studied it and came to certain wrong conclusions. Jesus was returning the people to the original intent of the Law.

The essential problem was that the religious teachers saw God's Law as only law. They did not comprehend it as a Law of love flowing forth from a heart that desired to fellowship with sinful man. They thought of it as something external, not internal; something that could be kept to the letter while violating its spirit. It had become a means of self-righteousness rather than the mirror of God's grace and mercy.

Jesus' current statement is a good example. He quoted from Leviticus 19:18 which reads,

Leviticus 19:18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I *am* the LORD.

The teachers interpreted it to mean you could **hate your enemy** and still be keeping God's Law. If you are a dad, you know that kids can do this. They act like you weren't totally clear in setting forth the rules and boundaries.

This arises from a mistaken sense of the word **neighbor**, which they understood only of a friend; and concluded, that if a friend was to be loved, an enemy was to be hated; not the Gentiles only, but anyone, among themselves, which could come under that name.

Jesus would tell the parable of the good Samaritan to expose the error of this perspective. Instead of asking, Who is my neighbor?, they should have been asking, Whose neighbor am I?

It illustrates the difference between a law approach and a love approach to the Scriptures.

But I say to you is a strong word of authority. Based on His own nature the Lord was canceling out all the previous teachings that fell short of God's ideal.

The Lord discussed several instances in which previously you would have hated your enemy but were now to love like a neighbor.

Bless those who curse you. It doesn't necessarily mean you ask God to bless them. It means you use kind words and expressions of love and grace even when being cursed. Another way of saying it would be, Let them curse, you go on blessing.

Do good to those who hate you. God showed His goodness to you while you hated Him – while you were yet a sinner. It was the power of that love that the Holy Spirit used to draw you to Jesus.

These exhortations remind us we are to be like Christ on the earth. How will the wicked be saved unless we bless them and do good regardless their words and actions?

And pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. Jesus did just this Himself as He hung on the Cross. Sure, He was the Son of God – God in human flesh. But while on earth He refused to use His deity and lived as a Spirit-filled man. If He could do it – you can! It is what He promised His disciples when He told them He was leaving for Heaven but would send the Holy Spirit to be with, in, and upon them.

The Christian who acts these ways reveals he is a **son of your Father in heaven.** Like Father, like son (and daughter!). This is the image of God we wish to represent.

God has gotten bad press as being distant and angry. I mean, we call disasters that cause cruel damage acts of God!

Jesus clarified that kind of thinking when He said **for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.** I see this as an appeal to the creation of the world. It works on two levels:

1. First, the times and seasons we endure are the same for every person. The elements and the weather don't favor one person over another.
2. Second, we must factor in that creation is fallen. The fault with it is not God's, but is man's. Still God does not destroy mankind but allows him to go on living in His creation while working out their salvation.

The Lord follows all this with a simple, yet irrefutable, argument:

Matthew 5:46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

Matthew 5:47 And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more *than others?* Do not even the tax collectors do so?

The **tax collectors** (publicans) were Jews who worked for the Romans. As if that weren't bad enough, they were given leeway to exact as much as they could. They worked on commission and gouged their fellow Jews.

It's nothing noteworthy to return love and greeting to those who love and greet you! It would not even need to be part of God's Law. No one needs to be told to love your loveable, loving neighbor.

Then follows this incredible statement:

Matthew 5:48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Wow. Any thinking person knows he can never be as perfect as God. But it was not to defeat you that Jesus said this. It was to encourage you. The Lord would do for you what the Law never could – perfect you.

The Jews already thought they had to perfectly obey the externals of God's Law. Some claimed that they were doing just that – but all the while they hated their enemies, etc. The common people were discouraged – knowing that the standards of their teachers were unattainable.

True, the standards Jesus set were even stricter – affecting the heart, not just the hands. But in them was the promise of power from within for all to come to perfection.

No wonder the people loved to hear the Lord speak!