

Our journey to the Cross over the past few weeks has included reflections on the teachings of Jesus from his Sermon on the Mount. These are difficult, demanding teachings about how we are to live if we follow him. We're going to continue this journey to tonight, taking a look at what he had to say about love, a kind of love only someone like himself could understand.

PRAYER

READ Matthew 5:43-48: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. ' ⁴⁴ 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. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Jesus began this teaching with the words, "You have heard that it was said." This was his regular refrain in this part of the Sermon on the Mount. When he used this expression earlier he was referring to laws which were about morality and ethics, that is, concerning murder, adultery, and oath-taking. But with this teaching Jesus was not talking about ethics anymore, but about something altogether different.

Jesus was bringing the people more deeply into His world, the Jesus-world. This world goes way beyond simple ethics. It's much deeper. I like to use the analogy of scuba diving. There's recreational diving and then there's technical diving. To go deeper than 130 feet is no longer "recreational." This is serious business, and it requires better equipment, decompression when returning to the surface of the water, and so forth.

Jesus' teaching until now has been "recreational," at least in the sense that all of his commands have been easy to understand and not all that hard to do, things like not murdering anyone, committing adultery, or breaking an oath.

With our lesson today, we've left recreational diving behind, and we're going into deeper water.

Again, Jesus said, **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' "** (Matthew 5:43).

Please note, in the Old Testament God never said that one should hate his enemy. That was a teaching of the Jewish Zealots, especially as regards the Roman occupation of Israel. They assumed their enemies were God's enemies, and since God promises to pour down his wrath on his enemies, of course they thought it was only right for them to hate them. But Jesus turned everything upside-down when he said, **"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"** (Matthew 5:44).

This is deep water, indeed. Let's try to put ourselves in their shoes. They had been politically oppressed, taxed, and even enslaved by the Romans for about 100 years. Before that it was Greece, and before that it was Persia, and then Babylonia, and then Assyria, one occupier after another for over 700 years.

These regimes had taken away their dignity as a race, their independence as a nation, and their sense of manifest destiny as the people of God. And now Jesus was telling them that they should love their enemies?

This would be like me telling you that you should love the person who slandered you at work, that you should love the guy who robbed your home, that you should love the people who fight for Al Qaeda and Isis! Except worse! For Israel's enemies never left, and they never recovered. Deep water indeed. One needs special training for this kind of diving.

Jesus said the reason we are going to love our enemies is **"so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven"** (Matthew 5:45a). This is a metaphor, being sons of God. It's a symbol loaded with meaning. In this case it means that

just as a son grows up admiring and imitating his father, so too we are going to admire and imitate our Father in Heaven.

What?! How can this be? God loves his enemies? Yes. Jesus said, “**(God) makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust**” (Matthew 5:45b).

Let me give you an illustration about what this means: Though I know some of you here believe God actually gives you great parking places at the mall during the holidays because you pray about it, let me be the first to inform you that God ALSO gives great parking places to absolute pagans at the mall during the holidays even though they didn't pray about it!

In Romans 12, St. Paul wrote, “**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**”

Jesus summarized this teaching like this: “**You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect**” (Matthew 5:48). Do you remember how I explained earlier that all of these teachings of Christ include hyperbole, gross exaggerations, to make a point? Well this is the hyperbole in this teaching, that we “**must be perfect.**”

Do you see why this is deep water diving, that it's a different world than we're used to, that it's the Jesus-world? After all, no one would blame you if you said you hated someone who has hurt your reputation, or stolen from you, or physically harmed you. In fact, most people would think you were a little off-center if you didn't.

But this is how Jesus saved us, isn't it. Jesus loved his enemies, even you and me. Sure, we love Jesus now. But before you believed, you lived in rebellion against him, and he was not your friend. But Jesus cried out, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!” and then he died, and then he rose from the grave and ascended into Heaven and sent down his Spirit into our hearts.

Saved by this act of love, God has called us to do the same, to be like Jesus, to share his love, the sacrificial love, even with, and especially with our enemies. That's what Jesus meant when he commanded us to “**be perfect.**”

A few verses before this passage Jesus gave some examples of outward signs of this kind of love. He said, **Matthew 5:39b**, “if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also”; and also, **Matthew 5:40**, “if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well”; and also, **Matthew 5:41**, “if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

Today, I think we might apply this teaching in many different ways. For instance, instead of losing our cool when we talk to someone with whom we disagree politically and calling them a moron, couldn't we decide up front that we love them and respect them regardless what comes out of their mouth? What would it take for us to say, “I love Hillary Clinton, or Donald Trump?” Can't we muster the Spirit of the Living God who lives in our hearts to say, “I love everyone whom God has made in his image, and I'm going to love them despite what they've done to me”?

Friends in Christ, when we can love people like this, then we are living on the other side in Jesus' world.

This week let us make it our devotion to see the world through the eyes of Jesus. He loved all and he died for all.

And this week let's find an opportunity to love our enemy that we may be perfect as our “heavenly Father is perfect.”

And this week let us share this message with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.