

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 5:43-48
“Family Likeness?”

March 8, 2015
(3rd Sunday In Lent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIID6: MATTHEW 5:43-48

"FAMILY LIKENESS?"

Love = Eternal Trinitarian Relation Prior To Creation

D6: 5:43-48 LOVING WHERE NO ONE ELSE DARES TO LOVE. Inclusion (vv.43b, 48)=Lev. Quotes 6th Antithesis, Climax 5:17-48, , Most Difficult, Goes Beyond No Vengeance (5th)

1) v.43 What The Law Of Moses Said: Lev. 19:1, 17-18 (LXX), (M). Israel + Resident Aliens

Love = Commitment To Be With A Person For Their Good, Towards God

43 "You have heard that it was said, Brief Formula, O.T. Quote + Popular Interpretation (Folk Wisdom) Of Meaning 7:12, 22:34-40, Love (4x: vv.43b, 44b, 46a [2x]), Second Half Of The Jesus Creed

1) 'You shall love your neighbor' //19:19, 22:39, Neglected In Citations, Neighbor = Fellow Israelite? Resident Alien, All? v.43b Not Quotation In Scripture, Inference? Not Emotion But Choice/Preference

2) 'and hate your enemy.' Inferred, Dt. 7:2, 2 Chron. 19:2, Ps. 26:5, 137:8-9, 139:21-22; Explicit In 1QS 1:10-11, 9:21-23 Popular Sentiment (e.g. Qumran), Second Lines Interprets First; Not Explicit In O.T. Love/Hate Not Emotions Here, Actions: First/Second Place In Regard, Help Relative Over Non-family, Our City Over Others, Near Over Far, Us Over Them

2) vv.44-48 Jesus' Radicalization: Love Even Enemies Like God Does.

Shock: Catalyst For The Formation Of Christian Character

a) vv.44-45 Acting Like God: Showing The Family Likeness. Does Not Mean Affirm Their Behavior

Not Abandon Moral Discernment, Love May Not Change Your Enemy, Not Passive Before Evil

44 But I say to you, v.44 = //Lk. 6:27-28 (Q), Authoritative Introduction, Jesus Drew A Larger Circle Of Concern Love Enemies = Ex. 23:4-5//Dt. 22:4, Prov. 25:21, 2 Bar. 52:6, T. Benj. 4:3

1a Love your enemies With Them, Act For Good + Prayer, More Than Toleration, No Scapegoats

b and pray for those who persecute you, Rome! Ps. 35:11-14, Lk. 23:34, Acts 7:60, Rom. 12:14, 1 Cor. 4:12, 1 Pt. 3:9 If Love Enemies, Then No One Is Unloved, Solidarity With Humanity

45 2 so that you may be sons (daughters) //5:9, 20. "You are sons of the Lord your God," Dt. 14:1 of your Father who is in heaven; v.45a = //Lk. 6:35c (Q), Disclose Our Parentage, Dt. 14:1, 1 Jn. 4:7-12

Ancient World Assumes Children Act Like Parents, Sirach 4:10

1'a for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, v.45b = M, God's Now Loving To All, Rom. 2:19

b and sends rain on the just and the unjust. Indiscriminate, Grounded In God Cares For All, Ps. 145:9, Prov. 29:13 v.45b Made No Sense To Many Jews/Pagans Polycarp Philippians 12:3, God Goes Not Sustain Only Those We Love

Jew b) v.46 2 Questions: Loving Only Those Who Love You. No Surpassing Righteousness Here

v.46 //Lk. 6:32-34 (Q), Like Culture, We Naturally Love Those Like Us, 5:20

46 1 For if you love those who love you, Reciprocity/Kinship; Jesus Is Not Necessary For This Kind Of Living what reward have you? Jesus Pushes Back Against Family-Only Love, (None At All!)

Lowest Common Denominator, Not Command Feelings But Actions

2 Do not even the tax (toll) collectors do the same? The Bad Guys, Disloyal To Nation/ Faith, ! (Of Course!) They Live By Cost/Benefit Analysis, Disciples Do More Than Jewish Sell-Outs! Not Just A Conventional Morality, But Radical

Gentile b') v.47 2 Questions: Saluting (Greeting) Only Those Who Salute You.

= Lowest Common Denominator, Cost-Benefit Analysis

47 1 And if you salute only your brethren, v. 47 = M, Insiders Only, Circle Of Recognition what more are you doing than others? (Nothing At All!)

Gentiles//Tax Collectors, Sinners, Harlots

2 Do not even the Gentiles (unclean outsiders!) do the same? (Of Course!), Mt. 18:17, 9:10, 21:32-33 Disciples Are Expected To Do More Than Outright Pagans! Lesser Loves Must Broaden To Larger Loves

a') v.48 Acting Like God: Aim At Family Likeness: Imitation. v.48 = Lk. 6:36(Q), "Be merciful"

Not Moral Flawlessness, Fastidiousness, Stretching Towards God's Universal Love

48 You, therefore, must be perfect (teleioi = complete/mature), Perfect = Like God, Inclusive In One's Love/Prayers Not Sinless, 7:11, "If you, being evil..." Surpassing Righteousness

as your heavenly Father is perfect (teleios). //Eph. 4:13, 5:1-2, 1 Cor. 11:1, 1 Peter 1:13-25, James 1:4, 1 Jn. 4:7-12 Echoes Lev. 19:2, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy," Lk. 6:36 "merciful"

// John Wesley's Teaching On Christian Perfection In Love

God's Perfection/Blessedness Is Active, Not Passive In Its Dynamic Of Universal Love, Wholehearted Discipleship For Jews, Perfect Was What Fulfilled Its Purpose, Rightly Related To God, Wholeness

We Express The Essential Characteristics Of The One We Imitate

We Are Offered In Jesus A New Way Of Seeing The World, Character Is Being Formed, Resources Given

Loving Enemy Does Not Mean Passivity In Face Of Evil, Love Still Makes Moral Distinctions

Anger, Adultery, Divorce, Falsity, Retaliation, Hatred, And Small Loves All Fragment; Broad Love Aims At Restoration

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 5:43-48

With 5:43-48 we come to the last of the six antitheses of 5:21-48. The first three form a cluster (5:21-26, 27-30, 31-32) as do the last three (5:33-37, 38-42, 43-48), each of which contains the word *evil* (vv.37b, 39b, 45b) as a catchword. The kingdom Jesus announces and demonstrates is in conflict with present evil arrangements; a fatal clash is ahead. The unit begins with the short formula, “You have heard that it was said,” followed by a fragment of Lev. 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor,” and an inference not found in Scripture, “and hate your enemy.” *Neighbor* is a fellow Israelite, and perhaps a foreigner who dwells in the land, while *enemy* is likely Roman occupiers who *persecute*. Insiders have a claim on us; outsiders do not. This is the common wisdom Jesus referred to in his summary, “You have heard that it was said...”

The thought unit opens (v.43b, Lev. 19:18) and closes (v.48, Lev. 19:2) with echoes of Leviticus as an inclusion (in red). Jesus statement (v.43) is followed by an extended comment beginning with the formula, “But I say to you...” The structure of vv.44-48 is a 4:2 concentric pattern (a-b//b’-a’) where the outer parts (a. vv.44-45 // a’ v.48) focus on imitating God in inclusive love and contain the phrases *your father who is in heaven* (v.45a) // *your heavenly Father* (v.48b). At the double center (b. v.46 // b’ v.47) are parallel forms, each with two sharp questions, the first on toll-collectors (v.46), the second on Gentiles (v.47). If your only concern is the good of insiders, you are no different. To live tit-for-tat in reciprocity with *people like me* is not to follow Jesus who tampers with comfort zones and stretches love beyond conventional borders. To love the enemy is to set an extreme trajectory for love and action.

A source analysis shows the introduction (v.32) is unique to Matthew (M). The antithesis formula, “But I say to you,” as well as the commands to love and pray for the enemy find a parallel in Lk. 6:27-28 (Q). The purpose statement, “so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven,” is partially echoed in Lk. 6:35c (Q), whereas the supporting reason, “for he makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and unjust” is unique to Matthew (M). The first of Matthew’s double questions (v.46) has a parallel in Lk. 6:32 (Q); the second (v.47) has no parallel (M). Luke has three examples (6:32, 33, 34), Matthew two. Luke has *sinners* in all three; Matthew has the binary contrast of *tax collectors... Gentiles*. Luke has question + statement; Matthew has question + question. His conclusion (v.48) is a command to imitate God in mature (perfect) love, whereas Lk. 6:36 is a call to imitate God’s mercy; both are variations on Lev. 19:2, “You must be holy, for I the Lord am holy.” Matthew’s tight concentric pattern (a-b//b’-a’) and his editorial hand with M and Q traditions shows clear editorial intent and skill.

What religious people in traditional oral cultures *have heard* is often a combination of formal texts and informal interpretation, as Jesus notes in v.43. The command to *love the neighbor* is from Lev. 19:18b; the phrase *and hate your enemy* is not biblical but a logical inference to mark insiders and outsiders. However, the command to *hate the enemy* was explicit at Qumran (1 QS 1:10-11). *Love* and *hate* are not primarily emotions- as in the modern world- but statements of preference. Insiders have a claim on our benevolence; outsiders do not (e.g. *charity starts at home!*). Jesus assaults conventional wisdom with *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*. Disciples go beyond norms to reflect a family likeness with the heavenly Father who sends sunshine and rain to all. To pray for the enemy is a means to love; in prayer we risk a new perspective. In a culture of tit-for-tat and strict reciprocity (e.g. tax collectors [v.46, Jewish traitors], pagans in general [v.47]), disciples go beyond. The command and invitation of v.48 is to become as broad in love and action as God is; this means both praying for and taking steps to benefit whoever is defined as an outsider. The grace is that what Jesus commands, he enables. He is the doorway into a new way of being human. Jesus redraws all our maps.

United Methodist Teaching On Sanctification And Christian Perfection In Love

U.M. Teaching: “Of Sanctification”

Helpful But Unofficial

Sanctification is that renewal of our fallen nature by the Holy Ghost, received through faith in Jesus Christ, whose blood of atonement cleanseth from all sin; whereby we are not only delivered from the guilt of sin, but are washed from its pollution, saved from its power, and are enabled, through grace, to love God with all our hearts and to walk in his holy commandments blameless. *BOD 2012: 70*

U.M. Confession Of Faith, Article XI: “Sanctification and Christian Perfection”

Distinctive Teaching

We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been born again are cleansed from sin in their thoughts, words and acts, and are enabled to live in accordance with God's will, and to strive for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Entire sanctification is a state of **perfect love**, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by **loving God** with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by **loving one's neighbor** as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God.

We believe this experience does not deliver us from the infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes common to man, nor from the possibilities of further sin (see AR12). The Christian must continue on guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin. He must respond wholly to the will of God so that sin will lose its power over him; and the world, the flesh, and the devil are put under his feet. Thus he rules over these enemies with watchfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit. *BOD 2012: 73*

John Wesley's Historic Questions For Ordination As Elders (Originally for all laity as well!)

- 1.* Have you faith in Christ? The source of all change.
- 2.* Are you going on to perfection? Where else would you be headed?
- 3.* Do you expect to be made **perfect in love** in this life? Passive voice = by God
- 4.* Are you earnestly striving after it? Our Energies Cooperating with God
5. Are you resolved to devote yourself wholly to God and his work?
6. Do you know the General Rules of our Church?
7. Will you keep them?
8. Have you studied the doctrines of The United Methodist Church?
9. After full examination, do you believe that our doctrines are in harmony with the Holy Scriptures?
10. Will you preach and maintain them?
11. Have you studied our form of Church discipline and polity?
12. Do you approve our Church government and polity?
13. Will you support and maintain them?
14. Will you diligently instruct the children in every place?
15. Will you visit from house to house?
16. Will you recommend fasting or abstinence, both by precept and example?
17. Are you determined to employ all your time in the work of God?
18. Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?
19. Will you observe the following directions?
 - a) Be diligent. Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed. Never trifle away time; neither spend any more time at any one place than is strictly necessary.
 - b) Be punctual. Do everything exactly at the time. And do not mend our rules, but keep them; not for wrath, but for conscience' sake. *BOD 2012: 262-263*

FAMILY LIKENESS?

“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”

What Jesus commands in righteousness, he enables by grace and example.

M A T T H E W 5 : 4 4 b

For years Paul Stanley was Vice-President of the Navigators, a worldwide parachurch ministry to students and the military. In 1967 he was a company commander in Vietnam; there he learned the power of Jesus’ words:

“On one occasion after the enemy withdrew, Stanley came upon several soldiers surrounding a wounded Viet Cong. Shot through the lower leg, he threw mud and kicked with his good leg when anyone came near. "Sir what do we do? He's losing blood fast." Stanley looked down at the face of a 16 or 17 year old boy. He unbuckled his pistol and grenades so the boy couldn't grab them. Speaking gently, he moved towards him. The young man stared fearfully but allowed the American to slide his arms under him and pick him up. As Stanley walked toward the helicopter, the soldier began to cry and hold him tight. During the ride, the young captive sat on the floor, clinging to the American's leg. He looked out with panic as they gained altitude. He fixed his eyes on Stanley, who smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. After landing, Stanley picked him up and walked toward the medical tent. As they crossed the field, he felt tenseness leave the young man's body. Eyes softened; his head leaned against Stanley's chest, resistance gone; he'd finally surrendered.” Then this word, “The God to whom we surrender is not our enemy. He heals and cares for everyone he takes captive.”¹

Such stories are moving; they also raise the question, Am I willing to become one who- like Paul Stanley- loves enemies as if it were the only right thing to do? If we hear the teaching of Jesus as just another set of commandments, of impossible

¹ Edited from “To Illustrate: Surrender,” *Leadership*, Summer 1992, 47.

things we have to do to earn the title *disciple* or get our ticket for heaven or earn God’s approval, we misunderstand. We brand them as ideals and dismiss them as aspirations for saints and super-Christians, not ordinary folk like ourselves. But that’s an error. Those who first received Jesus’ instructions about loving and praying for enemies were only beginners at following him. No one had done it before; they were first-generation pioneers, rookies, what the New Testament calls learners or apprentices, which is what *disciple* means. They were not pilots but students in ground school, learning the first lessons of weather and how a wing gives lift. Not yet Saint Peter but Peter the goofy loudmouth! As one observer put it, “Jesus did not call the qualified; he qualified the called.” Not the brightest and the best. They were not yet extraordinary men and women but everyday folk with an extraordinary new friend. What they contributed was not expertise but availability and ignorance, which is all God asks: show up and start learning from my Son! If you want to know the Father, hang around the Son and watch for the activity of the Spirit.

Whatever we think of Jesus’ teaching, it’s for all followers, not just the advanced, whoever they are? I’ve been at this *disciple thing* forty-two years as of last July 2, been at it hard, and I still feel like a rookie, which is maybe how its supposed to be. We can’t get off the hook by claiming it doesn’t apply to us. If we’re not learning to love enemies and drawn to the idea as an outrageous possibility, we’re missing something. Take actions that benefit them, said Jesus, and here prayer helps because it opens our eyes to see from God’s perspective. If self-preservation and prejudice-preservation and challenge-minimization are life priorities, we just can’t follow Jesus very far, can we? Let’s just admit it: he’s so annoying! Why can’t he leave well enough alone and just sprinkle some *blessing dust* on my life? Why disrupt everything? Why? Because he’s come to showcase a new world, the kingdom of God, and to clue us in on its agenda and powers. He’s come to rearrange everything about us around a new center, himself! Him traveling around with a dozen men and several women of high and low reputations² was a floating laboratory of the new reality. Early on he stopped the traveling kingdom show, sat down atop a high hill, and laid it all out. Some call it *The Sermon on the Mount*; I call it *The Constitution Of The Kingdom Of God*. What *Paris Island* is to Marine recruits, these three chapters are for Jesus-followers. No slack!

Thus far the disciples had responded to his call, “Follow me, and I will teach

² Luke 8:1-3.

you to fish for people.”³ What a fishing trip it was! They’d seen him heal multitudes and cast our spirits after announcing the kingdom nearness.⁴ Wherever Jesus was, stuff happened. Dr. Jesus was quite good at what he did. The power of God was present; the disciples had box seats at ground level. That they left work and family for an uncertain future with a near stranger demonstrates how powerful his attraction was. Jesus looked in their eyes and set their hearts and minds on fire.

We are all bewildered why three young Muslim girls would abandon all the benefits of England to join ISIS and become wives of men they never met with real damage to their families who envisioned a different life for their girls. Not jihad, but Oxford. Not grandchildren raised as terrorists in a war zone, but coming for frequent visits to be doted on. But their sudden break for a new world is not unlike what happened to the twelve. We’ve forgotten that the command *Follow me* is disruptive. They were now to live in the force field of who he was, and in *The Sermon on the Mount* learned how serious Jesus was about making them into a new species of human being, *kingdom people*. They were his recruits, and he had only three years for them to memorize his teaching, learn his moves and become infectious carriers of the new reality. The girls’ parents didn’t get a vote; that scares us, but neither did Mrs. Peter. Jesus has the right to disturb families. Family matters; it’s why Jesus taught a high view of marriage,⁵ but answering his call trumps everything.

Without knowing all that was going on, or even knowing how to talk about it- because it was all so new- they were invited to be ground troops in God’s invasion of planet earth. I suspect they spent much of the time dizzy and disoriented. Professor Jesus hooked them, and his was not so much a curriculum of *try harder* or *be better* as one of *please pay attention*, not to *make something happen* but to *watch something happen*. They were experts in fishing and tax collecting and novices with Jesus and the kingdom program. John 15:5 is the operational principle, “... for apart from me you can do nothing.” That pastors are often expected to *make something good happen* is a formula for religious busyness, not kingdom realities. Busyness keeps people distracted and occupied; kingdom realities bring life.

³ 4:19.

⁴ 4:12-25.

⁵ 5:27-32.

I propose that we add a new vow for baptism and church membership as a warning label, “Are you willing to look dumb on a regular basis, and then when you think you know something to look ignorant all over again?” The first disciples looked stupid much of the time. The biggest fear of most pastors is that one day we will be found out and fired! We really don’t know what we’re doing! Lots of smoke and mirrors in the church business: titles, robes, degrees, credentials, all the modern trappings of professionalism. Be real! *We are followers of an invisible man!*

I confess I often envy people who seem truly competent at what they do. They know their craft well, whether it’s flying airplanes, leading businesses, or practicing medicine. They have the marks of competence and signs of success. But this Jesus thing and this church thing and this obedience thing and this kingdom thing and this servant thing and this Holy Spirit thing- if rightly understood- are not like other jobs. The kingdom of God is a holy mystery, even if it’s in our midst, and in the end it’s not so much about mastery as about being mastered, not leading as about being led as a follower, not active voice so much as passive in the sense of allowing something beyond us to happen through us. I keep asking, “Will I ever get it right? Do I ever get to win?” Jesus smiles and is silent; I feel stupid again.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

High demand is surely here as Jesus takes key concepts from the Old Testament and makes God’s original will behind them clear. External conformity is not enough. He’s after a whole new me with a new heart, and so he raises the bar to the highest notch. I could never jump that high. What does he demand?⁶ Not only no killing but a heart free from the acids of chronic anger and the cold calculation of bitterness. Not only no adultery but no lust that sees people as objects of pleasure only, and no throwing away of spouses in serial divorce. Not only no false swearing with God’s name but no swearing at all because all your words are simple and true. Not only no revenge, a disciple must respond with creative non-violence that turns the other cheek, goes a second mile, and lives with an open wallet. Not only the love of the neighbor, but showing love to the one who is not like me, the enemy.

I can’t do these things on my own; neither can you, and that’s just the point. But in the company of Jesus and through the interior work of his Spirit we can be changed so we begin to desire these things, and then, by the miracle of God’s

⁶ The following litany is a summary of Mt. 5:17-48.

supporting grace, find ourselves sometimes getting it right and surprising even ourselves! Jesus welcomes us into a parallel reality called the kingdom of God. We're are invited to follow him and plug in! But living in two worlds at the same time is confusing; it helps us understand why the disciples were so slow to learn. What was natural for Jesus was unnatural for them. He was not weakened by the systemic disease of sin; evil had no place to attach; he was free to obey the Father and full to the brim with the Spirit. It's who he was; what would have been hard for him was to hate and not love.⁷

We may be committed to comfort, but Jesus is committed to nothing less than our being made perfect in love, which means always being dependent on his example and the Spirit's energies. He knows what we're capable of apart from him and what we are capable of with him, which is nothing less than amazing. Jesus will carry out the task of making us open pipes for God's love and power. The words "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," are not so much a command as a promise only Christ can fulfill. This is where we are headed. If we are going on with Christ, then we are- as John Wesley taught- going on to maturity and the high skills in love in this life. His brother Charles taught us to sing,

"Finish then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise."⁸

Have you noticed that human love has it's own, carefully monitored comfort zone? If someone is just inside or outside my boundary, I feel it. I like this kind of people but not that; people from this part of the country, not that; people who share my politics and bad habits, not those who are politically different and have other bad habits. We feel perfectly justified in our judgments. Anne Lamont, the quirky novelist, stings us with her insight, "You can safely assume you've created God in

⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco, CA: Harper-Collins,1998), 183.

⁸ "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," *UM Hymnal*, No. 384. For an analysis of Charles' hymns on the doctrine of Christian perfection, see John Tyson, *Assist Me To Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 2007), Chapter 15, "Perfection," 230-251.

your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”⁹

So it was in the day of Jesus. In Leviticus 19:18 it says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” and since the word *love* was clearer than the word *neighbor*, the second word was easier to shrink down to manageable size. Now nowhere in the Old Testament is anyone commanded to hate their neighbor. It’s found in the community that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, but not in Scripture. It was an understandable move to draw boundaries about who’s in and who’s out. To love the neighbor? Who is my neighbor? Surely not the pagans who worship false gods? Surely not our distant cousins the Samaritans who worship on the wrong mountain and accept only part of the Bible? Surely not fellow Jews who are lax about the law and my school’s interpretation of the law?¹⁰

Soon the circle is small enough to manage. You feel good about your ability to maintain civility, if not love, in the smaller circle. So when Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said...” he knew most of his audience thought that to love the neighbor and hate your enemy had the same level of authority. The first was Scripture, the second only prejudice which bends the Word of God all out of shape. Jesus then blew the second phrase out of the water, “But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you...” For Jesus the word neighbor was a large, not a small concept. Here I remember Edwin Markam’s little poem:

“He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.”¹¹

⁹ PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 5:43-48.

¹⁰ On the historical and exegetical details, see Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1999), 84ff; Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004), 93ff; Scott McKnight, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 139-150; Bonnie Thurston, “Matthew 5:43-48,” *Interpretation*, Vol. 41, No. 2, April 1987, 170-173; Warren Carter, “Love Your Enemies,” *Word & World*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Winter 2008, 13-21; John P. Meier, “Love in Q and John: Love of Enemies, Love Of One Another,” *Mid-Stream*, Vol. 40, No. 1-2, January-April 2001, 42-50.

¹¹ www.jefallbright.net/node/3018.11.

Fellow Jews drew a small circle; Jesus blew it up and re-drew the circle as big as God's heart and as broad as God's world. Because love is demanding, we wish to make it smaller and more manageable. Family over non-family, us over them, our kind over theirs, near over far away, Christian over Muslim, the attractive over the less so, beautiful over plain, but Jesus will have none of it. He's into large circles, big as the world, big as all the types of folk we'd rather avoid.

Contrary to common thought, the words *love* and *hate* in Jesus' world did not have primarily to do with positive and negative emotions. They are conscious exaggerations to speak about who gets preference, who gets help, who gets first place and who gets no place.¹² The use of extremes for such choices was common in that day; it made for clear distinctions. But Jesus is not asking us *to feel anything*. It's about prayer-saturated actions that imitate him. To wait to feel love before you act with love is deception and an excuse. A sign of living with Jesus in the kingdom is that you get the privilege of showing the world how God acts. To love your enemies through deeds of kindness and prayer is a kingdom privilege you can only do with Christ's help. I've been forced to ask this week, Who are my enemies? Who do I feel justified in putting outside my circle? Silly as it sounds, the prime candidates are several U.M. bishops who've decided to go rogue on our theology and ethics with an equal dose of anger for their more-orthodox colleagues who are silent in a time of crisis. Few these days are afraid of God; everyone is cowering before the culture.

It is interesting to inspect the images Jesus chose. If some of us had our way, according to Jesus (and I increasingly believe what he says about me rather than what I believe about myself), we would walk in circles of light and our enemies would walk in circles of darkness; our garden would get rain, theirs none at all. That way you could know clearly who was in and who was out. But's that's not how it works; our God is positively promiscuous with benefits: sun and rain for the good and evil, the just and the unjust. Not that distinctions are not made; moral categories hold even here. By evidence we know that the good are not the evil; the unjust are not the just, but only God is finally able to sort them out. When we learn God's ways of love-in-action, we show a family likeness that marks us as daughters and sons.

And not always, but sometimes, our enemies change. In September 1994 Cindy Hartman of Conway, Arkansas, walked into her house to answer the phone and was confronted by a burglar. He ripped the phone cord out of the wall and ordered her into a closet. Hartman dropped to her knees and asked the burglar if she could

¹² David Garland, *Reading Matthew* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 76-77.

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pray for him. "I want you to know that God loves you and I forgive you," she said.

The burglar apologized. He yelled out the door to a woman in a pickup truck: "We've got to unload all of this. This is a Christian home. We can't do this to them."

Hartman remained on her knees as the burglar returned the furniture. He took the bullets out of his gun, handed the gun to Hartman, and walked out the door.¹³

Praying for our enemies, especially with them, is disarming. It's not enough to avoid them and not do harm. We must actively love by doing good whenever possible and holding them up in prayer. An amazing thing I've discovered is that it's nearly impossible to do someone good, pray for them, and hate them at the same time. Such actions are not only for their benefit, but ours. In prayer we dare to see them as God does. Helmut Thielecke, a German theologian, saw this:

"Loving our enemies," he said, "does not mean we are supposed to love the dirt in which the pearl is buried; rather it means we love the pearl which lies in the dust. Since people who encountered Jesus found that he uncovered this level... they were changed by those eyes. Under that gaze their original destiny revived; it was loved into being.... they went away changed." Then this great line, "God does not love us because we are by nature lovable. But we become lovable because he loves us."¹⁴

Loving the enemy always changes us by rooting us back in the resources of kingdom of God, and if they respond to the grace coming their way, there's hope for them as well. And if your enemy is ever saved, you then have to love them as a brother or sister in Christ, which can be harder than having them as an enemy! I was such a lost jerk as a college freshman, utterly pitiful. When I was reconverted that summer and returned to Wake, I suddenly found a new set of friends who loved me. Where did they come from? Only later did I learn they had a meeting after I showed up at one of the Sunday night fellowships in the chapel, "Oh no, now we have to love Thrailkill. Who wants to go first?" Those guys saved my life.

There's lots of what looks like love out there, and is to some extent. Cordiality and conviviality, fraternities and sororities, hunt clubs, Bunko parties, poker nights, family reunions, whites with whites at Country Clubs, blacks with blacks at family reunions and nightclubs. After all, what could be easier than to love those who love

¹³ PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 5:43-48.

¹⁴ Idem.

us and extend greetings to those who extend them to us. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. It's a love that calculates benefits and keeps the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. It's the primary force of social cohesion for all sorts of groups, but it's not yet a *Jesus thing*, only a common human thing among all us sinners. Jewish toll collectors who sold out their faith to work for the Romans did as much for their buddies in the local shakedown gang. So did pagans. You don't need the kingdom of God for that low level of insider-love, only the desire to survive and belong, the ability to keep some in and others out and to think yourselves justified for doing so. People do that quite well, and now- thanks to some brain researchers in Holland- we have insight into how those tight bonds are formed and maintained.

Scientists have long known about the love-inducing, trust-building chemical *Oxytocin*, the *love hormone*.¹⁵ When present in elevated levels in the brain, we reach out to help and bond with other people. Adrenaline is *fight-or-flight*, oxytocin is *bond-and-belong*. But the *love hormone* has limits. Evidence indicates it produces a narrow love, a love for *our kind of people*, thus the common sense approach Jesus observed all around him, "You shall love your neighbor' and 'hate your enemy.'"

In studies from the Netherlands, students were given whiffs of oxytocin, then presented with a dilemma. Dutch students were asked to save "five people in the path of a train by throwing a bystander onto the tracks." The five were nameless; the person who might be sacrificed was given either a foreign or a Dutch name. Students who sniffed oxytocin prior to the challenges were much more likely to favor their own kind and sacrifice ethnic outsiders than a control group with no additives. Apparently, oxytocin increases our love and loyalty for people in our group and makes us more likely to exclude those who aren't. Clearly, in our fallen state, our natural love doesn't stretch very far.¹⁶ Oxytocin has clear survival value by supercharging insider loyalties, but it also means our brains- as currently wired- deeply resist the words of Jesus to love the enemy as a strange, threatening idea. The response is physiological; our very brains rebel. It's only when our love for and loyalty to Jesus exceeds our deep programming that we are willing to join him in such strange behavior as loving the enemy. To follow Jesus means burning some new

¹⁵ Discovered in 1909; for a fascinating read, see "Oxytocin," *Chemical and Engineering News*, <http://pubs.acs.org/cen/coverstory/83/8325/8325oxytocin>.

¹⁶ Nicholas Wade, "Depth of the Kindness Hormone Appears to Know Some Bounds," *New York Times* (1-10-11), www.nytimes.com/2011/01/11/science/11hormone.html?r=0.

neural circuitry to support new behaviors which defy the way the world currently works.¹⁷ Jesus knew intuitively what we confirm scientifically. It's only in developing a deep love and personal bond with him that we are empowered to behave differently; it's one reason he made personal attachment the first thing he asked for. "Follow *me*," he invited them, "and I will teach you how to fish for people with the tools of love." So if we are not loving our enemies and praying for them, the world has a right to ask who we're following, because if we're not different in our wiring from hanging about Jesus, what good are we? To be his follower is to risk deep reprogramming, literally developing a new mind and new affections. It's the love we first receive from Jesus that opens up the new world of possibilities he called *the kingdom of God*. As we follow Jesus in trust and in curiosity and in real doubts, we behave our way into a new way of being human. We find ourselves changed by love.

The quickest way to change your world and get in line for the next Nobel Peace Prize is to ask for grace to obey the command, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Here's a great example for baseball fans:

"Boston Red Sox third baseman Wade Boggs hated Yankee Stadium. Not because of the Yankees; it was just one fan. The guy had a box seat close to the field and he tormented Boggs, shouting obscenities and insults. This guy had the recipe. One day as Boggs was warming up, he began his routine by yelling, 'Boggs, you stink' and variations on that theme. Boggs walked over to the man sitting in the stands, 'Hey fella, are you the guy who's always yelling at me? The man said, 'Yeah, it's me. What are you going to do about it?' Wade took a new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, tossed it to the man, and went back to his pre-game routine. The man never yelled at Boggs again; he became one of Wade's biggest fans at Yankee Stadium.¹⁸

Love them. Do something creative.¹⁹ Might change them; it will change you.

¹⁷ On the integration of brain studies and Christian spirituality, see Rob Moll, *What Your Body Knows About God* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2014), especially chapter 10, "Neuro-Transformation," 155-170.

¹⁸ Preaching.com search under Matthew 5:43-48.

¹⁹ For ideas, see James Martin, S.J., "How To Love Your Enemies," www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-james-martin-sj/how-to-love-your-enemies_b_841538; Leo

Perfect is one of those words that tends to philosophical thought and abstractions, in the sense of flawless and ideal.²⁰ A new BMW may be the perfect car, but a broken-down '75 Nova may be a perfect fishing car. To the Hebrew mind that which was perfect was not flawless but that which fulfilled its purpose and was rightly related to God. So when Jesus said, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," he was aiming at the goal of completeness and maturity, not pristine perfection. We will always be tempted, always on the verge of sin, always lacking in knowledge, always making errors, but if we take Jesus seriously, he has the power to make us loving in a deeply human sense: we find ourselves with a share of the divine life that can be found no other way. You become a tool in the hands of your Creator. After all, loving difficult people is what God does with all of us!

Speaking of the command concerning perfection, which is another way of speaking about the love of enemies, C.S. Lewis clarifies the meaning:

"I find a good many people bothered by our Lord's words, 'Be ye perfect.' Some people think this means 'Unless you are perfect, I will not help you'; and as we cannot be perfect, then our position is hopeless. But I think he meant 'The only help I will give is help to become perfect. You may want something less: but I will give you nothing less.'²¹ Lewis also wrote: "The command 'be ye perfect' is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command."²²

CONCLUSION

My friend Thad sent me an email. A group of professionals posed a question to a group of 4 to 8 year-olds, "What does love mean?" Here are a few of the answers:

"When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her

Baubata, "Ten Tips For Life's Greatest Challenge: Love Your Enemies," zenhabits.net/10-tips-for-lifes-greatest-challenge-love-thy-enemy.

²⁰ On this text as part of a love ethic, see Glenn Stassen & David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003), Chapter 16, "Love," 327-344.

²¹ PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 5:43-48.

²² Idem.

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toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love." Rebecca- age 8. Good as that is, it's still tit-for-tat.

"You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget." Jessica - age 8. A bit closer.

“Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day." Mary Ann - age 4. Dogs are great teachers; they rarely hold grudges or withhold love.

All good so far as they go, but it was Nikka, aged 6, who came closest to the heart of the matter, “If you want to learn to love better,” she said, “you should start with a friend who you hate.” Nikka understood what Jesus was after and why it mattered.

If you have an enemy, and particularly if they are in your family like a spouse or a child or a parent, you have work to do, first with Jesus to draw near to his love, then with your enemy through loving actions and persistent prayer.

On good days I want to live in the kingdom and be so inwardly changed the impossible becomes habitual. Full of the love of Jesus for all kinds of people and the wisdom and joy that comes from living his way. This is hard, and my old brain circuitry frequently rebels, but what else is worth doing? Only God’s love satisfies the human soul; it’s one of the chief ways he draws us to himself. If you want to see your church flourish, this is the path. Not technique, not hype, but Jesus’ style love. The world around is waiting to see the real thing.

