

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 20: The Sixth Antithesis—Love Your Enemies

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Ye have heard that it hath been said, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.” But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect (Mt. 5:43-48; cf. Lk. 6:31-36).

In the sixth and final antithesis, Jesus makes a statement that both sets forth the positive side of the previous antithesis on non-retaliation and also serves as a climax to all the antitheses. The law of love summarizes the moral law of God (cf. Rom. 13:8-10). Therefore, this antithesis summarizes and includes all the moral teachings of the preceding antitheses. By way of introduction, there are some things that ought to be noted about this section of Scripture.

First, we need to note that most modern translations (ASV, RSV, NASB, NEB, NIV, JB), following modern textual criticism, leave three clauses out of verse 44 (e.g., “bless those”...; “do good”...; “who spitefully use”). Critical scholars favor the shorter text because it appears in a few older manuscripts. They argue that the expanded reading of the majority of texts, which are not as old, is likely the result of a copyist who borrowed material from the Lukan parallel, the sermon on a plain. We believe that the reading of the KJV and the NKJV, which are based on the *Textus Receptus* (or the Received Text, which comes from the body of texts referred to as the Byzantine/Traditional Text), accurately reflects the words of Jesus for the following reasons. (1) Although the Majority Text is not as old as the minority texts (e.g., *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus*), the Majority Text exists in vastly greater numbers and was accepted as authentic by the post-apostolic church. The absence of very early texts is likely a result of the simple fact that texts that were accepted and used wore out, while texts considered defective and corrupt were filed away and not used. (2) Modern scholarship regarding the majority texts (i.e. archeology, verification of various readings by older papyri, ancient versions and quotations from the early church fathers [e.g., the disputed ending of Mark was accepted as canonical by the second century A.D.]) has more and more vindicated the very early use and reliability of the traditional texts. (3) Historical studies have revealed very serious problems with the presuppositions and methodology of the early critical scholars such as Westcott and Hort. Indeed, it is rather shocking that conservatives have put their faith in modernists and heretics when it comes to textual criticism. (4) There are great variations between the *Vaticanus* and *Sinaiticus* manuscripts and, thus, their supposed superiority is really a myth anyway. Reformed and evangelical Christians need to return to the *Received Text* and reject the presuppositions of unbelieving critical scholars.

Second, of all the statements in the antitheses, this last one would probably be the most shocking to the Savior's audience. It is one thing to turn the other cheek, which is passive non-retaliation, but to actively love one's enemies is another, more difficult matter altogether. "As Augustine put it, 'Many have learned how to offer the other cheek, but do not know how to love him by whom they were struck.'"¹ It is completely contrary to our sinful nature to return good for evil; to not merely forbear, but to serve; to not merely hold our tongue, but to bless. To return evil for good is wickedness. To return good for good is common courtesy; it is expected normal behavior. But to return good for evil is extraordinary. It is behavior that can only flow from the cross of Christ. The true follower of Jesus must not imitate the world or even follow the compromised, corrupt religion of his day. Rather, he must be like Christ; he must be like his Father in heaven. The Christian life is a call to radical discipleship.

Third, of all the antitheses considered, this one contains the most obvious indication that our Lord is not refuting, correcting or adding to the Old Testament law. The statement, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy" (Mt. 5:43), is not found anywhere in the Pentateuch. Thus, this is additional, clear and conclusive proof that the Redeemer was not setting forth a more spiritual, superior ethic than is found in the Old Testament. The expression, "hate thine enemy," was an invention of the rabbis that catered to the Jewish people's sinful flesh. Here, as in all the other antitheses, Jesus is refuting the corrupt rabbinical teaching of His own day and is setting forth the true teaching of God's law. There is no better expositor of the moral law than the One who Himself gave it.

Fourth, the command to love one's neighbor is not a civil law (i.e. There are no sanctions attached to this law in Scripture except the phrase in Leviticus 19:18: "I am the LORD your God." This statement implies that God is a sovereign Judge who will personally punish violators of His law. It also implies the added obligation of a covenant relationship.); but a general overarching principle that undergirds the whole moral law. In the context of our passage love is not an emotion, but is primarily an attitude that seeks the good of others in the name of Christ and thus treats them lawfully and compassionately. Biblical love treats enemies in accordance with the commandments. It seeks their good to the glory of God even when one's emotions may be going in the opposite direction. Love emulates Christ who sought not to please Himself, but to edify others. "Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

The Scribes' and Pharisees' Perversion of the Law

As we consider the rabbinical perversion of God's law, it is important to note the clever manner in which they twisted Scripture so that we can avoid similar errors. Their main error was drawing an inference from the immediate context of a passage to the exclusion of the broader context of Scripture. The passage they developed a false inference from was 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 rabbis argued that the term neighbor is defined by the phrase "the children of your people"; that is, the Israelites. They would also point out that chapter 19 is addressed "to all the congregation of the children of Israel" (v. 2). The rabbis taught that the word "neighbor" only applies to Jews, to those who are in covenant with Jehovah. Therefore, the Gentiles and sojourners were not to be loved, but hated. They were

¹ Augustine as quoted in John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 122.

not part of God's people, but were heathen dogs that deserved to be despised and treated poorly. Among many of the Jews, the word neighbor was restricted even more so that it only applied to family members, close friends and those who belonged to their own religious faction. "Another barricade must be erected between *good* Israelites, such as the scribes and Pharisees, and *bad* Israelites, such as those renegades, the publicans (see verse 46) and in general the entire rabble that did not know the law (John 7:49). In such an atmosphere it was impossible for hatred to starve. It had plenty to feed on."²

We see that the perversion of this law was common in Israel, for when Jesus applied the moral law to the heart of a Jewish scribe, the lawyer knew he had not treated all men with love so he attempted to justify himself by saying, "Who is my neighbor?" (Lk. 10:29). The false teaching of the scribes had become the accepted interpretation of Leviticus 19:18, so that people would not quote the passage, but the perversion of it. Apparently, the rabbis dropped the words "as yourself" so they could make a memorable parallelism—"love your neighbor...hate your enemy." "Clearly, neither Jesus' listeners nor Matthew's readers would have been surprised by the added words, since the traditional interpretation had become regularly associated with the text."³

Another erroneous inference from Leviticus 19:18 was that since taking vengeance and holding a grudge were forbidden "against the children of thy people," then it must be lawful to hold a grudge against and take vengeance upon Gentiles. They turned a positive command to love into a command to hate. They opposed themselves to the underlying purpose of the whole moral law with their evil interpretation.

If we examine the broader context of Scripture, it is obvious that the command to love one's neighbor refers to all mankind and not just the Jews. If we read a little further in the same chapter, we find the following commands: "And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 19:34). In the first giving of the law we read: "You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 22:21). Exodus 23:4-5 is even more specific: "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it" (Ex. 23:4-5; cf. v. 9). The law of love says that our behavior toward others is not to be governed by our feelings or personal animosities. We must be kind and helpful, even toward our enemies. What is involved here is essentially a command to return good for evil. Clearly, God's law does not allow personal acts of evil or words of abuse toward our enemies. This teaching of the law is reflected in the book of Proverbs: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (Pr. 25:21). In other words, treat him with love, mercy and kindness. "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the LORD see it, and it displeases Him" (Pr. 24:17-18). Christians are not to harbor hatred and resentment in their hearts toward their enemies. They are not even allowed to delight in their downfall.

The scribes and Pharisees were guilty of doing what all false teachers do. They turned to the Scriptures with the express purpose of justifying what was already popular and accepted as truth by the Jews. Thus, they had no choice but to take certain passages out of context and ignore

² William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 313.

³ Donald A. Hanger, *Matthew 1-13*, 134.

many other clear passages. Roman Catholic theologians do this with reference to justification. Modern Arians (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses) do this with the deity of Christ. People who follow the liturgical calendar do the same with the regulative principle of worship. Therefore, it is crucial that we have a solid working knowledge of the whole Bible when we approach any particular passage as an interpreter. Being a teacher of the Word requires a very careful, patient, knowledgeable and diligent examination of the Scriptures. The source of most errors arises from approaching the Bible with presuppositions that are not derived from Scripture itself and from not understanding sound, basic, biblical principles of interpretation. It is a horrible thing when men interpret the Word of God falsely and then spread that error to thousands of people. The heresies of the scribes and Pharisees are still with us today. It is also unconscionable how, in our day, many preachers spend little time in labor over the Word because it is much easier and more popular to throw together a short "sermonette" filled with pop-psychology and self-help vignettes. They would do well to listen to James' sober warning: "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (Jas. 3:1).

Excursus on Alleged Difficulties

Before we turn our attention to Jesus' positive teaching on how to love our enemies, we would do well to consider three areas in Scripture that have been offered as contrary or at least problematic as related to our Lord's teaching.

The first alleged problem regards God's command to Israel to exterminate the seven Canaanite nations that inhabited Palestine. This campaign of conquest is regarded by many modern minds as barbaric and exceptionally cruel. It is viewed as a supreme act of hatred. This event in Israel's history does not contradict the injunction to love our enemies for the following reasons. (1) The order to exterminate the seven pagan nations was unique in salvation history. It was not an ordinary feature of the true religion, but was something extraordinary. The Israelite battles against the Canaanites were the only authorized, genuine "holy" wars in history. (2) The wars against the Canaanites were a consequence of a judicial act of God. These nations were so wicked and abominable that Jehovah ordered Israel to mete out the heavenly sentence of death against them. Israel was God's instrument of divine judgment. They were God's executioners; their actions were no different in principle than the magistrate who lawfully executes a man for murder. They were not carrying out a personal vendetta or personal acts of hatred, but were following God's orders. Interestingly, they were not faithful in completely cleansing the land and consequently were plagued with syncretism, idolatry and wars throughout most of their subsequent history. (3) The holy wars of Israel were unique in that they served a prophetic purpose. They served as types of the gospel's spiritual conquest of planet earth. The physical sword has been replaced by the use of the spiritual sword—the Word of God and the preaching of the gospel.

The second alleged contradiction to the Savior's command to love our enemies comes from the imprecatory Psalms. It is argued by some that the Psalms contain sharp invectives against personal enemies and are full of petitions for revenge. Some scholars of dispensational persuasion argue that they reflect ethical concepts that were only appropriate for the dispensation of law; that personal vindictiveness was only permitted in the Old Covenant. Before we see that (properly understood) the imprecatory Psalms do not contradict the command to love our enemies, it is important to note that the imprecatory Psalms are inspired by God and, aside from the Messianic Psalms, are the most frequently quoted Psalms in the New Testament. In fact,

Jesus Himself used imprecatory Psalms. Therefore, they cannot be relegated to a former dispensation and they cannot contradict the Savior's command to love our enemies. The solution to this alleged problem is as follows.

(1) The imprecatory Psalms call down the wrath of God on wicked men, only on the assumption of their continued impenitence (cf. Ps. 7:12ff; 109:16ff.). The Christian loves his fellow man by praying for his salvation—that God would open his blind eyes and deaf ears and cause him to repent and believe in Christ. But, the believer is also to pray that those who reject the truth and oppose themselves to Jesus and His people will receive the just judgment of God. Our Lord rules the earth and changes history by regenerating hearts and by crushing the wicked in His wrath. There is absolutely nothing contradictory in loving our enemies by praying for them and treating them lawfully with kindness, while also hating everything they represent and are attempting to accomplish with perfect hatred. Our hatred is directed at their opposition to God and Christ, not at their *personal* differences with us. “The total destruction of evil, including the judicial destruction of evil men, is the prerogative of the sovereign God, and it is right not only to pray for the accomplishment of this destruction, but even to assist in affecting it when commanded to do so by God Himself.”⁴

(2) It is important to note that a careful reading of the imprecatory Psalms demonstrates that these petitions are *not* utterances of hatred for private injuries or prayers for personal revenge. Sometimes they express the desire for God's justice to come upon heathen nations who have done great evil upon the people of God. “At other times, if the psalmist seems to call down the divine vengeance on personal foes, it will be found that the person who speaks is always David, and that he speaks in his public character, as the chosen servant of the Lord and anointed King of Israel; and that he has in view, not his own particular foes, but the enemies of the cause of which he is the representative,—the cause of God, and truth and righteousness in Israel. To forget David's singular position in the nation, and to read these psalms of his as if they were the utterances of some private individual in reference to neighbors who had done him a private wrong, is to leave out of account the principal element in the case.”⁵ As a king who in a special way typified Christ and a prophet who could write inspired, infallible poetry, David could reveal Jehovah's plan to destroy His enemies for the harm done to His church. These were infallible judicial petitions. When we follow the pattern of these imprecatory prayers, we always do so with the condition “if they do not repent.” David was inspired and we are not.

The third objection regards the behavior of Christ Himself. The same Jesus who told us to love our enemies sometimes pronounced terrifying woes against His enemies. For example, in Matthew 23 our Lord calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, fools, blind guides, whitewashed tombs, full of uncleanness, hypocrisy and lawlessness, serpents and brood of vipers who will not escape the judgment of hell. Regarding this objection we need to note a few things. a) As the Messiah and Son of God, the Savior had the authority and perfect knowledge to make judicial pronouncements against the Jews. God's holiness and justice in no way contradicts His love. An antinomian, permissive love is not biblical love at all. As Jehovah's servants we can only speak in conditional terms. That is, if a person does not repent, then he or she will go to hell. b) The Lord's teaching regarding loving one's neighbor is not at all inconsistent with telling people the truth about their sin, spiritual condition apart from Christ and the consequences of refusing to

⁴ J. G. Vos, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” in *The Westminster Theological Journal* (May 1942), 4:2:132.

⁵ William Binnie, *The Imprecations: God's Forgotten Prayers of Power* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books [1886] n.d.), 3-4.

repent. Love means speaking the truth even when the party involved may be upset or even terrified by what is said. It is only the modern antinomian concept of love which sees an inconsistency between love and judicial pronouncements of woe. Remember, when the Redeemer speaks about loving one's neighbor He means primarily to treat that person lawfully in thought, word and deed. It does not refer to an emotional state, permissiveness or telling someone what they want to hear.

Christ's Corrective Teaching

Jesus corrected the scribes' and Pharisees' abuse of God's holy law saying, "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" (Mt. 5:44). In this verse, the Savior does two things. First, He makes it very clear that the term neighbor is to be applied to both Jew and Gentile, friend and enemy. The restriction of the word by the rabbis was unwarranted and unscriptural. Every human being regardless of race, creed, social status or nationality is to be treated as a neighbor. Because all men are created in the image of God they must be treated in accordance with God's holy law. The persecution of people because of race or nationality that has plagued mankind throughout its dark history is clear evidence of man's depravity. That a nation which is professedly Christian could, by its laws and actions, grossly abuse other "races" simply because they were different is an indication that the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount has not been carefully heeded by many churches. Jesus used the word "enemies" because such a word cannot be circumvented by sophisticated arguments. This word includes even the most despised people imaginable. Yes, even they are to be loved.

Second, Christ tells us to love our enemies and then defines what biblical love entails. This point is very important because if love is not defined biblically, then this whole command seems impossible and irrelevant. When most people think of love in our modern culture, they think of feelings or emotions. In fact, love "is defined in the dictionary as 'An emotion, sentiment, or feeling of pleasurable attraction toward, or delight in something' ...plus such terms as 'strong feeling of affection...devoted attachment...great tenderness.'"⁶ While love as emotion (e.g., Jacob "loved Rachel" [Gen. 29:30]) and even as strong lust (e.g., Amnon's lust for Tamar [2 Sam. 13:4]) is found in Scripture, here our Lord is speaking of love as a duty. Obviously, love as an emotion cannot be commanded. It would be absurd to argue that we should have a strong desire, emotion or feeling of affection toward our enemies. Jesus is speaking about love as a fulfillment of God's commandments. Out of our love toward God and our dedication toward Jesus as Lord and Savior, we must treat our enemies fairly, justly and kindly whether we like it or not. This love has a regard for divine authority and a respect for God's image in our fellow man.

When we say that Christ is focusing on love as a duty or as a fulfillment of the law, we do not mean that this duty is purely external. As Paul says, "Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). Biblical love is always connected to a regenerate heart. It always proceeds from a heart purified by faith. A pure stream can only come out of a pure fountain. It also flows from a pure conscience; that is, a conscience that is "properly responsive to the claims of moral

⁶ G. D. Funderburk, "Love" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 3:989.

obligation, honestly bent on following out its convictions of truth and duty.”⁷ Only a genuine Christian can love his enemy in the manner prescribed by Scripture. Further, as noted in the previous antithesis, we are not permitted to harbor thoughts of revenge, retaliation, malice and bitterness in our hearts toward others. When we are wronged we are to turn such matters over to God who will recompense such things on behalf of His people.

But having noted the internal aspect of love, we still must not confuse love as a duty to fulfill the law as sentiment or tender affection toward our persecutors. Jesus does not command us to be fond of or like our enemies. This point is proven by the imprecatory Psalms and the reality that, in the New Testament, the apostles instructed believers to take comfort in the fact that a time is coming in which God will severely punish their persecutors (e.g., 2 Thess. 1:6-10). Even the saints in heaven who have been martyred cry out, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). Love never means that we ignore reality or pretend that evil people are good or that we forsake justice and discipline. However, we should seek their good through our words, actions and prayers. “This is love, that we walk according to His commandments” (2 Jn. 6). This kind of love is something that only Christians can have. “Only the grace of Jesus Christ can enable a man to have this unconquerable benevolence and this invincible good in his personal relationships with other people.”⁸ When the Holy Spirit applies God’s Word to our hearts, then biblical love will become our habitual response to others, even our enemies.

Jesus tells us what this love means by giving us three practical examples of love in action. The first regards how Christians are to use their tongue: “Bless those who curse you” (Mt. 5:44). “To bless a person, in Scripture, often means to implore blessings from God on him, and had this clause stood alone, I should have been disposed to interpret the phrase in the passage before us—‘Implore blessings on the head of him who is imprecating evil on yours.’ But in this case, the injunction would be quite synonymous with pray for them. To ‘bless,’ here, I apprehend, signifies to speak in a civil and friendly manner, so far as truth will permit, both to and of those individuals who speak to and of us in a very different way.”⁹ Our Lord’s statement is very radical when we consider that it was spoken at a time when most Jews would not even extend greetings to Gentiles. The pagan Gentiles responded in kind and would not even greet a Jew. For the most part, Jews and Gentiles saluted only their own fellow nationals.

Jesus says all such behavior must come to an end. When a believer is insulted, he is not to return evil for evil, but is to respond with kind, pleasant, friendly words. He is to do what he can to say something good instead of something evil. This is essentially the positive side of the command to not resist evil. When unbelievers insult us, we are to disarm the situation by responding positively instead of negatively. As Paul says, “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification” (Rom. 15:2). When we are insulted, our sinful nature wants to strike back. Christ wants us to maintain our composure and speak words that do not tear down, but rather edify. The apostle concurs when he says, “Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside [i.e. unbelievers], redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (Col. 4:5-6). “When we speak to them, we must answer their revilings with courteous and friendly words, and *not render railing for railing*; behind their backs we must commend that in them which is commendable,

⁷Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 80.

⁸William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:175.

⁹John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:216.

and when we have said all the good we can of them, not be forward to say anything more.”¹⁰ The professing Christian who holds his tongue and even speaks pleasant words to a person, but who then goes about gossiping about him and saying all sorts of bad things about him obviously does not love his enemy.

Insulting a heathen who has attacked us verbally may appeal to our sinful flesh, but it is certainly not loving behavior. It does no one any good and only makes matters worse. But when we do not respond as would be expected and speak words of kindness and edification the unbeliever will be much more likely to listen to the gospel. Our job as Christians is not to defend ourselves and demand our rights when personally affronted, but is to represent Christ and exalt His name. “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (Eph. 4:29).

The kind of biblical speech that flows from Christian love is vastly superior to the so-called love and kindness of the world. The unbeliever can offer words of compassion; but, because his words are rooted in a heathen worldview they cannot really bring God’s blessing. The believer, however, can speak *the truth* in love (Eph. 4:15). He can speak words that, when attended by the power of the Holy Spirit, can really change lives. When a believer descends to the level of a pagan and exchanges insults, he has forgotten his calling as a representative of Christ. He not only becomes a horrible witness of what a believer should be, but he misses an opportunity to suffer unjustly for the Savior and glorify God.

The second example of love in action is doing good to those who hate us (Mt. 5:44). When an unbeliever treats us with contempt, we are not to reciprocate, but are to respond with benevolent actions. One of the best examples of doing good to an enemy is found in the story of the good Samaritan. This parable was told in response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” (Lk. 10:29). In this story a man (presumably a Jew) is beaten and left for dead on the side of a road. After two Jews, one a priest and the other a Levite, pass the man and do nothing for him, a Samaritan comes, has compassion on him, binds his wounds and does anything it takes to save his life. This action was significant because the Jews despised the Samaritans and would have nothing to do with them. Most Jews would not even enter Samaritan territory. This Samaritan was doing good to a man who probably hated him and who would not have lifted a finger to help him. The Samaritan was loving his enemy by having mercy on him and helping him. Therefore, when Jesus says, “do good to those who hate you,” He wants us to help a person in need even if we know he hates us and is our enemy. Paul taught the exact same thing: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head” (Rom. 12:20; cf. Pr. 25:21-22).

By rendering good for evil in our personal encounters we show unbelievers that the norms governing Christians are extraordinary and heavenly compared with those outside the church. When believers live consistently with biblical ethics, unbelievers will recognize such behavior as worthy of approval and the name of Christ will be glorified. This does not mean that all unbelievers will stop hating Christians, but it does show them that believers bring peace and stability into a chaotic world. If there is to be any discord in the community, it must not be traceable to our failure to do good to those around us. Paul’s statement that such active love will heap coals of fire on our enemies’ heads means that our acts of benevolence will often result in a burning sense of shame and remorse in our enemies. By doing good to our enemies, we avoid the temptation to retaliate. “It is good never to retaliate, because if we repay evil for evil, we double it, adding a second evil to the first, and so increasing the tally of evil in the world. It is better to

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:66.

be positive, to bless, to do good, to seek peace, and to serve and convert our enemy, because if we thus repay good for evil, we reduce the tally of evil in the world, while at the same time increasing the tally of good. To repay evil for evil is to be overcome by it; to repay good for evil is to overcome evil with good. This is the way of the cross. ‘Such is the masterpiece of love [Godet].’”¹¹ This is one of the greatest principles of sanctification—that we train ourselves not to commit sin by replacing sinful actions with their godly counterparts. In this case, acts of revenge are set aside and replaced with acts of love. This behavior will aid in the spread of the gospel by showing the unbelieving community the effect of the gospel on our lives. Sadly, if we look at American history, this command to do good to our enemies has repeatedly been neglected by Christians and whole denominations. The blatant racism that has been a large part of our culture should have been obliterated by professing Christians over two hundred years ago. Instead, most professing Christians followed heathen culture instead of leading it.

Doing good to an enemy can involve anything from helping with a flat tire, loaning a neighbor a lawn mower or giving a person a ride. Even little acts of kindness can go a long way in making peace in the community. Are we doing good to those who hate us? Are we showing the love of Christ to enemies by our actions? Let us demonstrate to the world that our profession of the Savior is not empty by doing exactly what He says, even when we would rather do the opposite.

The third example of love toward our enemies regards prayer: “Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.” Instead of meditating on how we would like to get revenge against such people, we are to think of ways that God can help them and are to bring these petitions to God. Our Lord’s illustration contains great wisdom, for it is impossible to harbor bitterness and resentment when we pray for a person’s good. This activity takes our mind off of ourselves and our own egos and focuses it on the problems of others. It helps us realize that our enemies are in bondage to sin. They are blinded by Satan and are following a path that leads straight to the pit of hell. To pray for such people is to have mercy on them. Thoughts of malice and ill-will melt away as we commune with God and realize our place in the kingdom of God. Our life is not about settling personal scores or getting even; it is about spreading abroad the love of Christ. Remember, all unsaved sinners by nature are haters of God and are hostile to the Christian faith. All men, apart from the Savior, are God’s enemies and the enemies of His people. Thus, if Christians only prayed for people that were friendly toward God’s kingdom, then the kingdom would not be advanced by this important means of grace. Do you pray for people who abuse you because you are a Christian? Do you ask God to have mercy on those who persecute you by causing them to repent and believe? It is important to understand that we are not asking God to tolerate their wicked behavior or to overlook it; that would be antinomian and unjust. Instead, we are asking God to change that person by His sovereign grace and make him a new person; a person who loves the Redeemer and who loves the brethren. This is precisely what Jesus did on the cross when He prayed for God to forgive those who crucified Him.

All the examples of love in action could be summarized under our Lord’s statement: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:39; Lev. 19:18). “A regular self-love respects all our interests, but especially our spiritual and eternal interests: so ought our love unto our neighbor. A regular self-love prompts us to be concerned about our welfare tenderly, to seek it diligently and prudently, to rejoice in it heartily, and to be grieved for any calamities sincerely: so ought our love unto our neighbor prompt us to feel and conduct ourselves with regard to his

¹¹ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 337.

welfare.”¹² If we have this perspective which seeks to love even our enemies as ourselves, then thoughts of revenge melt away, for we would not want any harm to come upon us. Moreover, this perspective causes us to think of ways of doing them good. Instead of focusing upon retaliation, we think of ways to help bring them to repentance. This attitude will affect our speech, our actions and our prayers. This is the perspective that needs to become habitual in our lives. If every Christian could consistently follow this principle, then slander, backbiting, tale-bearing, gossip and other acts of hatred would cease.

Paul follows this line of thinking in the great chapter on love in 1 Corinthians: “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (13:4-7). As Christians we must learn to be slow in thinking thoughts of resentment. We must patiently bear with those who seek to provoke us to anger with unjust attacks against us. We must not be quick to assert our rights or hold a grudge against those who injure us. We must learn to set our self or ego aside so that, instead of seeking our own, we seek the good of others. Instead of resenting people who treat us like dirt, we must channel that energy into good words and works that lead to edification. All of this, of course, requires great humility and composure. It requires being poor in spirit (Mt. 5:3) and thirsting after righteousness (Mt. 5:6). It requires placing Christ and His kingdom far above our own reputation and interests. It requires a repeated practice of loving thoughts, words and actions, even when our emotions would like to go in the opposite direction. But, as we repeatedly put biblical love into practice in our lives every day, these things will become holy habits. And, eventually, our emotions, which were so accustomed toward anger and retaliation, will also more and more be brought into subjection to Jesus Christ.

This teaching is important because if our society continues to decay morally and the persecution of believers becomes even more acceptable and increases, we will be called upon to more and more put the Savior’s teaching upon love into action. Therefore, we must continually study this section of Scripture and place it in our hearts because we have no choice but to love our enemies and forgo revenge. We are commanded to bless and to do good to those who hate us. We are even called to pray for those who look at us having eyes aflame with rage against us, who may even want to kill us. We must pray with love and faith knowing that this is the will of God. If God does not answer our prayer for the conversion of our enemies, then we can rest assured that He will answer our prayers of imprecations against the sons of perdition.

Reasons for Obedience

After our Lord sets forth the injunction to love our enemies and gives three examples of Christian love in action, He gives two reasons why we must love those who hate us.

The first reason is that these loving actions demonstrate that we are like our Father in heaven. Jesus says we are to do these things in order “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” (Mt. 5:45). “Hebrew is not rich in adjectives; and for that reason Hebrew often uses *son of*... with an abstract noun, where we would use an adjective. For instance *a son of peace* is a *peaceful man*, *a son of consolation* is a *consoling man*. So, then, *a son of God* is a *godlike man*.”¹³ The reason why we must love our enemies is that God shows benevolence and kindness

¹² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 134.

¹³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:177.

to all men. Since this is how our Father in heaven conducts Himself, we must be sons of God or godlike men by modeling our behavior on His. Note that the Savior does *not* say that acting in this manner causes us to become sons of God. By grace we are already God's sons through adoption; but, by loving our enemies we confirm or manifest the fact that we are God's people. This point will be emphasized again in verse 48. Christ wants us to reflect upon the character of our heavenly Father. As Paul says, "And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children" (Eph. 4:32-5:1).

Jesus explains the love we are to imitate by pointing out that God gives His good gifts of sunshine and rain to both the just and the unjust. (Note that verse 45 does not say "the sun," but "His sun." The sun is God's and not ours or "mother nature's"; it exists by His creative power and providence). God gives the benefits of His creation to those who are not only saved and love Him, but also to the most wicked of the heathen who hate Him. God causes the pagan farmer's crops to grow just as He does the Christian's, even though the pagan worships idols and does not thank God for his crops. Unbelievers breathe the same fresh air as God's people. They enjoy the same ocean breeze, beautiful sunsets, lovely mountain streams, magnificent fall colors and delicious foods. These are all gifts of God. Jehovah does not deal with men in the present world on the basis of how they treat Him or according to what they deserve, but is longsuffering and benevolent. Indeed, everything that is good in this world should be attributed to God. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17).

God (even in His relations with the ungodly) shows kindness, beneficence and mercy. The heathen are recipients of good gifts because of God's kind, longsuffering nature. "Not only does God bear with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction, but He bestows upon them many favors."¹⁴ Under His normal providences, God bestows His temporal blessings upon the just and unjust alike. (Only in exceptional cases of judgment, such as the Egyptians during the leadership of Moses, does Jehovah make distinctions). "As the Gospel of Luke expresses it, 'He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil' (vi. 35)."¹⁵

This kindness and mercy, however, must never be confused with God's saving love directed to the elect. God shows benevolence toward His image even in reprobate men; but, these men are still hated by God and shall receive their due recompense of reward in the life to come. There is no inconsistency here, for a temporal kindness to the wicked and everlasting saving love toward the elect are two completely different things.

In this passage we learn some important things about what Calvin, and Reformed theologians after him, call "common grace." (1) God restrains His wrath due to sin before the final judgment. While it is true that, after the fall, a curse has come upon this earth and all the evil and calamity in this world is due to sin; nevertheless, God has greatly restrained the execution of His wrath on the wicked. If it were not for this restraint, unrepentant, non-believing sinners would immediately be consigned to everlasting damnation. This restraint is obviously necessary so that God's plan of redemption could be carried out and an elect people (the invisible church) could be gathered throughout history. (2) God not only withholds the full brunt of His wrath against godless men in history, but also gives good gifts to wicked men that they do not deserve. That is why this behavior is called "common grace," because *unmerited favors* or *undeserved gifts* are bestowed on wicked men, reprobates and even apostates by God. These men

¹⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 141.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

freely partake of the rich bounty of Jehovah's creation. They are also bestowed with gifts, talents and aptitudes that enable them to excel in science, technology, art, music and agriculture. God even ordains institutions for the protection of life and limb, for the better ordering of society and restrains sin in the world so that men can live in peace and prosperity. All of these benefits, however, must be distinguished from "special grace" or "saving grace," which is only directed to God's elect.

Some have attempted to pervert this doctrine by using it to soften the biblical Calvinism taught in Scripture. Others have denied it altogether by saying that kind treatment by God only leads to greater judgment in the life to come. While it is true that the abuse of God's gifts in this life will result in greater condemnation on the final day ("To whom much is given, from him much will be required" [Lk. 12:48]), this does not mean that the many good gifts bestowed by God do not flow from His kindness and mercy. This point is obvious from our text, which teaches that we are to imitate God who is good and renders kindness to His enemies.

Following God's example means that we need to learn to treat people, not according to how they treat us, but as God in His kindness treats His rational creatures. This will require us to, in a sense, go outside of ourselves and view relationships objectively. When we see someone get all bent out of shape emotionally because they have been mistreated, we remain composed because the abuse did not involve us. We have all experienced this. We need to train ourselves to see attacks against us in the same way so that we can avoid being led by negative or angry emotions and, instead, think of a loving, scriptural response.

If we are unwilling to treat our enemies with love and kindness, but instead stubbornly hang on to hatred and acts of retaliation, then we need to question our commitment to Christ. There are many who proclaim that they are God's children; but how many evidence it by their walk? This command to love our enemies is what should set us apart from other men. It is what should distinguish us from religious hypocrites like the scribes and Pharisees. "The man who hates his enemies is not like God—cannot be a child of God. A child of God!—he is of his father the devil, and the works of his father he does."¹⁶ The sad fact that, in our own time, many professing Christians do not even show kindness and courtesy to other believers shows us the need for churches to return to a study of the Sermon on the Mount. If Christians gossip, slander and backbite against each other like wild dogs, then how can they be an example of the Savior's love to others? This God-imitating love is a major way to let our light shine before men (Mt. 5:16).

The second reason that Jesus gives is that Christians must be different from the heathen and must be expected to go beyond the love of the wicked if they are to receive a reward. "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?" (Mt. 5:46-47). There are a number of notable things about these verses.

(1) Our Lord acknowledges that a kind of love exists in the unbelieving world. People have tender affection for their children and vice versa. Christ said that even evil men give good gifts to their children (Lk. 11:13). Wicked people have friends which they treat with favor and kindness. "Fallen man is not incapable of loving. The doctrine of total depravity does not mean (and has never meant) that original sin has rendered men incapable of doing anything good at all, but rather that every good they do is tainted to some degree by evil. Unredeemed sinners can love. Parental love, filial love, conjugal love, the love of friends—all these, as we know very

¹⁶ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:218.

well are the regular experience of men and women outside Christ.”¹⁷ Because of sin, however, unbelievers’ love is impure. It is connected to self-interest and it is never connected as it should be to the glory of God. The love required in the second table of the law was always designed to rest upon, and flow out of, the love toward God enumerated in the first table of the decalogue.

(2) In the example of an unbeliever who loves, the Savior names one of the most wicked, despised class of people among the Jews: “tax-collectors” or “publicans.” Tax collectors at that time were farmed out by the Roman authorities. These men had an agreement where they paid a fixed amount of money to the Roman government. In return, they were allowed to place tolls on exports, imports and merchandise that had to go through their territory. The amount that the tax-collectors could take was not fixed and so they essentially squeezed every dollar out of the populace that they possibly could. They had a reputation for being exceptionally cruel, greedy and guilty of extortion. The fact that all the injustice, pain and hardship they caused were done in the service of the Roman state made them even more despised. The tax-collectors were getting rich at the expense of the Jews and were helping heathen oppressors in the process. Thus, when Christ speaks of tax-gatherers loving those who love them and greeting the same, He wants the disciples to see how ordinary such love is. It is not love that flows from saving grace and it is not a kindness that is above the kindness shown by the wicked. In other words, it is not a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

(3) Consequently, the punch line of our Lord’s example is found in the question, “What do you do more than these?” (Mt. 5:47). It is not enough for disciples to resemble unbelievers. The call of discipleship that permeates the whole Sermon on the Mount is a call of extraordinary behavior. The Savior’s disciples must excel in a sincere, heartfelt obedience to the true meaning of the whole moral law of God. Christians must, by the power of the Holy Spirit, rise above ordinary fallen humanity.

The Redeemer’s question is very important. It is a question that we should put to ourselves every single day. What do we do more than others? How do we live our lives differently than ordinary, unsaved people? Are we only friendly to our own friends? Well, the heathen do that also. Do we excel at kindness to strangers? Do we lead lives of sexual purity? Or, are we no different than the heathen? Do we insult those who insult us? Or, are we exceptional? Do we bless instead of curse? Do we watch the same ungodly trash on TV and the movies as the heathen? Or, are we completely different than our neighbors? With the light that God has given us, we certainly know a lot more than others. As Christians we obviously profess much more than others and have been promised from God great things that do not apply to unbelievers. “God has done more for us, and therefore justly expects more from us than from others; the glory of God is more concerned in us than in others.”¹⁸ If we walk carnally as typical unsaved men and women do, then we walk far below the behavior that our dear Savior expects and demands.

This question—“What do we do more than others?”—is especially significant and sobering to our own generation, when many professing Christians are little or no different in their thinking, behavior and speech than the godless, surrounding culture. In our day, evangelicals commit adultery and get divorced at virtually the same rate as unbelievers. For the most part, they disregard the Sabbath day, as do their heathen counterparts. Increasingly, worship services have become nothing more than stupid, corny imitations of the world’s entertainments, whether theater, rock concert or variety show. The children of professing Christians usually attend the same state schools and grandparents are put away in the same state-run or state-

¹⁷ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 120.

¹⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:67.

subsidized old folks' homes. Professing Christians often vote for the same pro-abortion, statist, anti-freedom candidates as do the sodomites, atheists and feminists. Jesus speaks to this great declension and says that if professing disciples do not rise above the spirituality and ethics of the tax-collectors of this world, then they cannot expect a Christian's reward. "Note, those who promise themselves a reward above others must study to *do more than others*."¹⁹ "Justification before God is by faith alone, but it is not a faith which remains alone. Saving faith is not a lifeless, inoperative and sterile thing, but a living, active, fruit producing principle. And it is by the fruit which a saving faith produces that it is distinguished from the worthless and unproductive faith of the empty professor."²⁰ A saltless, lightless, worldly, unbelieving, unfaithful expression of Christianity is no Christianity at all. It is ICHABOD writ large.

All of this raises a question: Why should a Christian be so different than others? The true disciple has been born again by the Spirit of God and has been changed from someone who hates Christ and the law to someone who loves the Savior and wants to obey His Word. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). The natural man has an innate hatred of God and the law because of his depravity. It is to be expected that he would love his friends and hate his enemies. But the true believer is very concerned about pleasing His Redeemer and thus diligently works to bring all his thoughts, emotions and actions into captivity to Jesus. There are times when he would like to strike out and return evil for evil, but he restrains himself and gives a biblical response because he knows that this pleases his Master. Our love for others grows out of our relationship to Christ and our love toward Him. Our uniqueness lies in our union with the Savior in His life, death and resurrection. We are different only because God has made us different. Thus, the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount are really only for true disciples. Only people who are saved by grace through the person and work of Christ can imitate their Father who is in heaven. Yes, beloved, God has set you apart, and through Jesus, has made you unique and special. This is your calling. This must be your whole existence. "If God is your Father you must be special, you cannot help it. If the divine nature is in you, and has entered into you through the Holy Spirit, you cannot be like anybody else; you must be different. And that is what we are told about the Christian everywhere in the Bible, that Christ dwells in his heart richly through the Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit is in him, filling him, working His mighty power in the depths of his personality, teaching him his will"²¹ through His Word. If this does not describe your experience, then you need to examine your faith in Christ. Are you truly committed to Him or are you like the scribes and Pharisees who lived their lives within a self-created world of illusion and deceit?

Be Ye Perfect

Jesus ends His argumentation on loving our enemies with the logical consequences of all His teaching on this topic. "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:48). There is a sense in which this statement is a fitting conclusion to all the proceeding antitheses. There are a number of significant things to note regarding this statement.

First, in Greek the "you" is emphatic: "You—My disciples—are to be perfect..." Jesus is emphasizing our duty as Christians and He is emphasizing the antithesis between true disciples

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 143.

²¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:319.

and non-believers. “You *on your part* over against all hypocrites such as the scribes and Pharisees are to be perfect.”

Second, in order to understand our passage, we need to determine what our Lord means by the word “perfect.” Since there have been misunderstandings and disagreements regarding this word, we will examine a number of different things regarding it. (1) In this particular, context the Savior is not discussing the perfection or perfect righteousness associated with justification. The whole context of this section of the Sermon on the Mount deals with the proper interpretation of the moral law as it relates to sanctification or personal behavior. Note also that very similar commands are found in the Old Testament, all of which are designed to spur the Israelites to greater holiness or obedience to the law. “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2; cf. 11:44; 20:7, 26; Eph. 5:1; 1 Pet. 1:16). Deuteronomy 18:13 says, “You shall be blameless before the LORD your God.” The Hebrew word translated “blameless” is *tamin*. The Greek Septuagint translates this word as *teleios*, the same word in Matthew 5:48. Thus, just like our passage, the Israelites were commanded to be perfect before God. Since the Old Covenant Jews and the Redeemer’s disciples were already a redeemed people, these commands are not calls to embrace the imputed righteousness of Christ. Rather, they are calls to obey God’s holy law not as a covenant of works, but out of gratitude for a salvation already received.

(2) The command to be perfect must not be interpreted to mean that Christians are capable of ethical perfection in this life. Wesleyan perfectionists and various holiness teachers have interpreted the passage in this manner. However, this cannot be the case because believers are called to a whole life of hungering and thirsting after righteousness (Mt. 5:6); they are commanded to repeatedly pray, “Forgive us our debts” (Mt. 6:12); Paul, the greatest apostle, admitted that he had not attained perfection (Phil. 3:12) and the Bible explicitly teaches that no Christian can achieve moral perfection in this life (1 Jn. 1:8). Perfectionism is a false and dangerous doctrine. It rests upon the presupposition that God would never command what man is incapable of carrying out. The fact, however, that man has fallen into sin and has rendered himself incapable of perfectly obeying the law cannot be a reason for God to lessen His standard. If it did, then the more that man sinned and caused himself to be enslaved to sin, the lower God would have to make His ethic. Since the moral law is absolute and unchanging, that is impossible.

(3) There are three possible ways of looking at this word in Scripture. The first refers not to absolute ethical perfection, but to a consistent ethical uprightness in a believer. For example, in Genesis 6:9, we read that “Noah was a just [i.e. righteous] man perfect in his generations.” The word “perfect” in this passage cannot refer to sinless perfection, for the Bible teaches that Noah was still committing sins (e.g., Gen. 9). Here the word means that Noah was recognized by the community as blameless, righteous or above repute. “The same word is used of a sacrificial animal that was ‘without blemish.’ Thus, Noah was a man whom no one could justly criticize. He lived an irrefragable life.”²² Given this usage, we can say that when the word “perfect” is used to describe the behavior of a believer, it essentially refers to a person who is habitually righteous; who constantly walks with God (e.g., Gen. 17:1; 2 Sam. 22:24-27). If we apply this meaning to our passage, then Jesus is commanding His disciples to have a consistent, habitual, non-hypocritical righteousness. He would be telling us to be blameless, upright and above repute in our behavior because the God we serve is perfect in holiness and righteousness.

²² G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 1:159.

A second view regards the word perfect as meaning “‘brought to completion, full-grown, lacking nothing.’ Jesus is saying to the people of that day, as well as to us now, that they should not be satisfied with half-way obedience to the law of love, as were the scribes and Pharisees, who never penetrated to the heart of the law.”²³ While it is true that the word *teleios* (or *tamin*) can have the sense of completeness, wholeness or totality (e.g., Lev. 23:15, 30; Josh. 10:13; Mt. 19:21; Col. 4:2; Jas. 1:4), it is unlikely that the word has this meaning in this particular context. The parallelism between man’s perfection and God’s perfection clearly points in the direction of ethical perfection. Our Lord does not mean, “Be complete for your Father is complete.”

A third view is that Jesus is setting forth the goal of ethical perfection or a summary statement of the standard of God’s moral law. Our Lord has been expositing the moral law and this law requires absolute perfection in thought, word and deed. Believers are to aim at and press towards perfection in holiness, even though they know that such perfection is unattainable in this life. “Be ye therefore perfect is the unchanging requirement of the Law, ‘even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect’ is the exalted standard which the gospel presents to us. The moral excellency of the Divine character is the copy and rule set before us, and nothing short of that is to be our sincere, ardent and constant endeavour.”²⁴ “The perfection here is the fulfillment of the Mosaic law.... Love for God and one’s neighbor (and particularly, love of one’s enemies) will be described by Matthew as the commandments upon which thus all the law and the prophets depend (22:40). For Matthew, to be *teleios* means to fulfill the law through the manifestation of an unrestricted love (including even enemies) that is the reflection of God’s love. This unrestricted love preeminently embodies ethical perfection. This perfection, and nothing less, is that to which Jesus calls his disciples.”²⁵

It is a great error on the part of many professing Christians who teach that the divine rule of duty is relaxed and made easier for the new covenant era. It is precisely this kind of thinking that Jesus’ statement is against. We are not to act like the scribes and Pharisees who water down the standard of God’s law and twist it to make it easier to obey. The law calls us to strive for ethical perfection even though we will not achieve it until we are glorified. This is the only interpretation that does justice to the parallel of God’s perfection. The moral law of God is a reflection of God’s nature and character. Thus, to seek to obey the moral law is to seek to imitate our heavenly Father. We are to love and be merciful because our God is loving and compassionate. The moral law of God is not some pragmatic, positivistic, ethereal, utilitarian rule that God has arbitrarily imposed on the people. It is a window into the perfections of God Himself. That is why Jesus is so concerned to refute the perversion of the moral law by the Jewish leaders.

Some may object and say, “Why would God command the impossible?” The answer to the objection is simple. Because of who God is, He could do no less. God would have to cease to be God to relax the standard of His moral law. Others may object and say, “What’s the point—why should I strive for a goal that is unattainable in this life?” The answer to this question is also uncomplicated. One reason is that this is what God requires. Another is that our obedience pleases Christ. We strive for perfection because this behavior demonstrates our love for our precious Savior. Further, our struggle for personal holiness, for a habitual, daily obedience to God’s law, carries blessings in this life as well as great rewards in the life to come. Therefore, we

²³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 317.

²⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 144.

²⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 135.

must strive for, pray for and yearn for perfection until the day we die. This is the call to radical discipleship.

Third, there are some important applications that we should note regarding the command for perfection. (1) By way of inference, our passage teaches the doctrine of justification by faith alone. If we were to ask the average American if he or she expected to go to heaven, the answer would usually be, “yes.” Such people would go on to explain how they have been good people. They have not committed any despicable crimes and most of the time they have been very nice to others. But, in light of our text, the appropriate question that needs to be answered is, “Have you been ethically perfect in your thoughts, words and deeds?” It is this question that flows from the standard of God’s holy law and makes all of us beggars in the dust before God. Since we obviously fall far short of such righteousness, we must by faith embrace the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. His sinless blood washes away our guilt and His perfect life merits eternal life in our stead. (2) The life of Christian discipleship is one of humility. The more that we mature in knowledge and personal godliness, the more that we will see our continued need to look to Christ. Biblical sanctification causes us to be humble because the closer we walk with God, the more we see ourselves as we really are. Discipleship entails self-abasement. It progressively destroys pride and self-complacency because our God is infinitely holy and we know that we are not even close to the perfection that God demands. (3) It teaches us that sanctification is a long struggle in which we must never give up. The holiness doctrine popularized in the nineteenth century that the Christian life is easy, that all we need to do is “let go and let God” is a lie of the devil. While it is true that we have victory over the power of sin in our lives by virtue of our union with the Savior in His life, death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6-7); nevertheless, discipleship involves a life of struggle, service, self-denial and good works for Christ. Because the standard is so high, this means we can never let down our guard, relax and say that we have arrived. We always must be watching and praying for sin and temptation not to overcome us.

May God enable us to be like Him and love even our enemies! Amen.

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