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**Extreme Love 2**  
**Matthew 5:43-48**  
April 6th, 2014, Jeff Germo  
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Matthew 5:43–48 (NLT)

**<sup>43</sup> “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. <sup>44</sup> But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! <sup>45</sup> In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. <sup>46</sup> If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. <sup>47</sup> If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. <sup>48</sup> But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.**

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The monastic community called the Essenes who lived near the Dead Sea in an area called Qumran (and incidentally when we go to Israel we are going to go to that very amazing area and see where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered by a Bedouin Shepherd boy in 1947) had a mantra they lived by, “Love your brother; hate the outsider.” This is what is natural to us. It is not natural for us to love our enemies.

The famous atheist, Christopher Hitchens, who died last year, had much disdain for this teaching of Christ to love our enemies. He thought it was not only ridiculous, but evil to love one’s enemies, which is quite an interesting idea that there could be evil without a God who and absolute truth. But, nevertheless, here is what he said,

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**“I’m not going to love them. You go love them if you want. Don’t love them on my behalf. I’ll get on with killing them, destroying them, erasing them. And you can love them. But the idea that you ought to love them is not a moral idea at all. It’s a wicked idea.”<sup>1</sup>**

Now, as Christians, it’s easy for us to listen to this hate filled vitriolic rant from Christopher Hitchens and judge him as someone who is not very loving. But, when you really think about it, he is just doing what comes naturally to all of us. He just happens to be honest. And are we, who call ourselves Christians, any better? What sort of thoughts do you have about certain people who might get on your nerves, or someone who has hurt you in some way? Do you have thoughts towards them that are loving? Do you truly want God to bless them? Would you really care if they died, or would you say, with your inner voice that only you can hear, “It serves them right. They got what they deserved?”

That is what is natural for us. **It is not natural for us to love our enemies.** As Jesus said, “It is easy for us to love those who love us first and are kind to us, but to love those we know do not love us, that is a completely different matter. And for religious people who see Jesus’ teaching as simply a bunch more commands, to add to our already long list of do’s and don’ts, none of this is going to make sense. You see, people who attempt to live their lives biblically, according to “rules,” always want to know where the lines are so they don’t anger God. It’s like “walking on eggshells” in a home with an angry father.” What religion does is attempt to appease a god who they *think* is angry. And so they are always asking, “What can I do or not do?” “What can I get away with?” “How far can I go?” “How close to the edge can I get without falling off?” “When is enough enough?” “When will God be satisfied?”

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There is a very interesting book I read a few years ago by an ethnically Jewish agnostic author named A.J. Jacobs. The title of the book is *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*.

I found it a very fascinating read. For the first eight months he attempted to live his life according to the Old Testament laws, and then, in the final four months of his experiment, he attempted to live his live according to the New Testament in a very literalistic way. He spent some time interviewing Jewish Rabbis and Christian pastors in order to understand how to follow the Bible literally. Now, of course, he was doing this whole project with the goal of having an interesting experience so he could sell books. I could be wrong, but as far as I know, he was not seriously searching for God. But, here is one of his take aways from his 365 day experiment.

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**“I became the ultra-fundamentalist. I found that fundamentalists may claim to take the Bible literally, but they actually just pick and choose certain rules to follow. By taking fundamentalism extreme, I found that literalism is not the best way to interpret the Bible.”<sup>2</sup>**

If we think that the Bible is simply about living by certain rules, we will pick and choose. We will attempt to justify ourselves by how we adhere to the rules. We will stand in judgement over others as if we are the standard by which *they* are to be judged. And we will look at those outside the church walls as if they are somehow lesser than us.

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<sup>1</sup> [Christopher Hitchens] - See more at: <http://str.typepad.com/weblog/2012/05/love-your-enemies.html#sthash.bHmMrXWw.dpuf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://ajjacobs.com/books/the-year-of-living-biblically/>

Jesus takes us to a higher plane. He did not come to exhort us or cheer us on to do better, or to do more. He came to right what is wrong in the world. He came to defeat sin and death. He came to satisfy the law and to give life to all who would receive it.

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**And he came to change us into the kinds of people who will allow him to live his life through us in a way that would be exemplified by unconditional love.** That is a supernatural happening. We cannot do it by pulling up our boot straps and trying to be good. Jesus is not talking about *doing* in any of his teaching. He is talking about *being*. The difference may seem subtle and semantical, but it is actually huge. It comes at it from the other side. It's not that there is not doing involved in the way of Jesus. There is. It's just that the doing is a byproduct of the being. God wants our hearts so that we will live the life of Jesus in his strength and power.

Let's go back to our text.

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**Matthew 5:43–48 (NLT)**

<sup>43</sup> ***"You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy.***

Leviticus 19:18 is the law that Jesus is referring to. It says,

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**Leviticus 19:18 (NLT)**

<sup>18</sup> ***"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.***

***"Love your neighbour as yourself."*** It very clearly says that. But, glaring in its absence is any part that says "hate your enemy." Actually, nowhere does the Bible say that we are to hate our enemies. The religious again, as is typically the case, reduced the ways of God to the lowest common denominator. They knew the Mosaic Law demanded love for one's neighbour, so they deduced that means it is okay to hate those who aren't your neighbours, which would, of course, at the very least, include their enemies.

This question of loving one's neighbour is what prompted Jesus to tell his very famous story about the Good Samaritan. Let's read that in Luke 10:30-37.

Now, just to give a bit of context, some experts in Jewish religious law came up to Jesus in order to attempt to trap him in his words. They asked him how they could inherit eternal life. And in his typical fashion he answered their question with a question. Jesus was very good at doing that. He rarely just gave a pat answer. He would either tell a parable or ask another questions. The reason he did this is because he wanted to make sure that he hit the heart.

So, he asks, "What does the law of Moses say?" The religious experts answered correctly. ***"Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as yourself."***

***"That's right,"*** Jesus affirmed. ***"Go do it."***

Now, as typically happens when the religious rule keepers are confronted with rules that they don't like, they try to justify themselves by asking Jesus to define neighbour. They knew that the law taught that they had to love their neighbour. And they also knew that the more narrow the definition of neighbour the more likely they were to fulfill the command. So what they were hoping for is that Jesus would affirm their reductionistic form of legalistic spin doctoring to justify their minimalistic idea of love. They wanted to get away with the minimum. They didn't want their so called love to take any effort. So Jesus tells this story.

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**Luke 10:30–37 (NLT)**

<sup>30</sup> ***Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road. <sup>31</sup> "By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by.***

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<sup>32</sup> ***A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. <sup>34</sup> Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him.***

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<sup>35</sup> ***The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.'*** <sup>36</sup> ***"Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was***

**attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked. <sup>37</sup> The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."**

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**The whole point of this story is to define who our neighbours are.** In other words, Jesus is answering the religious leaders' question as to who are they exempt from loving? And again, Jesus raises the bar uncomfortably above what the religious experts were accustomed to. To really understand this you need to know just how much the Jews disdained the Samaritans. They were seen as on the same level as swine. They were unclean. The Samaritans were racial mix of Jew and Gentile that ran back several centuries, so their hatred ran deep. Jesus was calling these religious people to love in a way that they had never before even considered. And he is calling us to do something that runs so counter to our intuition that it is impossible without the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

I want you to notice something here. Who is helping whom? In this story, it's the Jewish person who is in need. The other religious people walk on by and don't lift a finger and it is the despised Samaritan who helps the Jewish person. It would have raised the bar quite high if things were turned around so that the Jewish man helped the Samaritan. That certainly would have spoken volumes and raised a few religious eyebrows about who their neighbours were, but Jesus went even a step higher.

What he was saying would have totally caught them off guard. He turned things around in such a way that it would have been shocking to his audience.

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**It's the religious people who are needy and blind.** "Who us? I don't think so. We have our theology down pat. We know the difference between right and wrong. We have the answers for all those people out there. They have nothing we need."

In everyone of the teachings of Jesus he is asking the question, "Where is your heart?" Pay attention to your inner voice. What are your thoughts about those outside the church walls? What are your thoughts to those in other churches? What are your feelings about those who may have a different theology than you? What is your inner voice saying about those who you think are less spiritual than you because they aren't as biblically knowledgeable or as busy serving or whatever?

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**If you are standing in judgement over anybody for any reason, you are just like the blind religious people that Jesus was directing his teaching to.**

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**Matthew 5:44-47 (NLT)**

***44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?***

It's easy to love people who are nice to you. Anyone can be good to people who are good to them. Even gangsters do that. Everyone can. It's a much different story when it comes to wanting the best for someone who seems to not have your best in mind. I think, if you were honest, there are probably some people in your life whom you would be okay with them dying. You might think that they got what they deserved. And if when I said that, a certain person came to your mind, that is the kind of person that Jesus said you are to love. That is the kind of person you are to love and pray for and bless.

That is Jesus' message to us this morning. His call for every single one of us here this morning is to stop our abhorrent despicable empty religiosity and start allowing the Holy Spirit to enter into the dark places of our souls that keep us from loving in the way that God has called us to love - even, and maybe especially, those we would normally look upon with disdain and contempt.

Jesus ends with this most shocking statement.

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***48 But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.***

Again, Jesus is calling us to the impossible. He calls us to love like God loves. Can you imagine that? When I think that God actually loves *me* and wants to be with *me* it blows me away. I'm not always the easiest to love. But, he doesn't wait until I deserve to be loved. He doesn't wait until I shape up. He never withholds his love from me because my theology is not quite on, which, it probably is not, because God is infinite and I am finite. When we get to heaven we are going to have quite a few surprises about what God is like. He is much more gracious than we could ever imagine. He is much more loving than we could ever dream of being, even towards those who would call themselves his enemies. And that is how he is calling us to love.

The truth, though, is that we cannot do it — on our own. That is why we need Jesus. Jesus is calling us not to do, but to be. That doesn't mean that we don't do good things. It means though that we need to be so filled with the love of God that it overflows from him to us, and on to even those who we would vote most unlikely to be loved, and that would include those we would consider our enemies. Jesus is calling us to himself so he can change us to be like him.

Just a note on the word 'perfect' in verse 48. It's the same word that James uses in James 1:4 where he says that if we persevere through our trials God will make us 'perfect' (in some English translations). The word actually means 'complete.' What Jesus was saying to the religious people was that their understanding of the law was incomplete. If they, and we, have a true and complete understanding of the law and the Gospel it will change us so that we will love like Jesus loves.

Here is the crux of the matter and the difference between one who is steeped in religion and legalism intent on trying to be good enough so God will accept their behaviour, and one who is so taken, so smitten, by Jesus and so filled with his love that they cannot help but love in the way that God would love. That is the sole call of our lives.

In closing, before we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, I want to read Paul's prayer to the Ephesians over you, because this is his prayer for you and me as well. This is how much he loves you. We need to become so taken with the love of Jesus that it overflows from him to us and onto others. I am going to read it and then I would like you to meditate on it in complete silence for a couple minutes. And after that you can start making your way to the front to get the communion elements. And then bring them back to your seats and we will partake together.

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**Ephesians 3:14–21 (NLT)**

***<sup>14</sup> When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, <sup>15</sup> the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. <sup>16</sup> I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. <sup>17</sup> Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong.***

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***<sup>18</sup> And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. <sup>19</sup> May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. <sup>20</sup> Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. <sup>21</sup> Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.***



**Extreme Love 2**  
**Matthew 5:43-48**  
**Week of April 6th, 2014**

**Object of this study:** To let Jesus's words hit our hearts and move us to love those who are hard to love.

**Worship** (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes of silence have someone interrupt the silence and read Ephesians 3:14-21 meditatively to the group. (after each phrase pause and let the Lord speak to you before reading the next)
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

**Welcome** (5 – 10 minutes)

Who is your favourite antagonist from literature, movies, nursery rhymes...?

**Word** (20 - 30 minutes)

1. What stood out for you from the sermon?
2. Read Matthew 5:43-48. Check the background on this by reading Leviticus 19:18. What do you notice about the Jews' understanding of this Old Testament law? What had been added? What had been left out?
3. Read Luke 10:25-37. Who starts this conversation? What is his goal? What is his goal in asking Jesus to define 'neighbor'? What is Jesus' goal in his question of verse 36?
4. In what ways was Jesus' story remarkable? How would it have caught the attention of the law expert and made him think outside of his paradigm? Does the concept of 'enemy' appear in this story?
5. "The whole point of this story is to define who our neighbours are." So, according to Jesus, who are our neighbours?

**Work** (30 - 40 minutes)

1. It's not natural for us to love our enemies. This is why we try to justify ourselves out of it. Why did Jesus say we are to love our enemies?
2. Consider the word "perfect," which is also translated as "complete." How was the Jews' previous understanding of 'love your neighbor' incomplete/imperfect? Why does Jesus call on them, and us, to a bigger concept of love, and a bigger understanding of 'neighbor'?

**Sermon quotes:**

Jesus answered questions with another question or a parable because **"he wanted to make sure that he hit the heart."**  
**"God wants our hearts so that we will live the life of Jesus in his strength and power."**

That's the purpose of this 'work' section -- to let Jesus' words hit our hearts.

So...

3. Who are your enemies? What sort of thoughts do you have about certain people who might get on your nerves? Or someone who has hurt you in some way? Or someone who thinks differently than you do on a topic that is very important to you? Or someone who lives in a way that you don't respect? Think of other reasons why the Jews would have had trouble loving the Samaritans. Who came to your mind when you were listening to the sermon on Sunday?

4. Pray for the people who came to mind (not out loud by name right now). Ask God to bless them and to show you ways you can bless them.

**"The crux of the matter...is the difference between someone steeped in legalism and one who is so taken by Jesus and filled with his love that they love in the way that God would love."**

5. How can we be smitten with love for Jesus, filled with his love, established in his love? (See Eph. 3:17.) For example, we can spend time with him, we can recognize how much he has forgiven us of, we can ask him to open our eyes to how we've been his enemies and he has loved us, we can meditate on verses that express God's love for us, such as Zeph. 3:17....)

**"Jesus' call for every one of us is to stop our abhorrent despicable empty religiosity and start allowing the Holy Spirit to enter into the dark places of our souls that keep us from loving in the way God has called us to love -- even, and maybe especially, those we would normally look upon with disdain and contempt."**

**HOMEWORK**

6. Pay attention to your inner voice again this week. Notice your thoughts toward people. Pray for your enemies. Ask God to bless them and to show you ways you can bless them.
7. Spend time with Jesus! Grow in your love for him.
8. Journal how Jesus' words hit your heart, through the sermon or this study or other ways.