

The King's Speech: I have to love who?

Matthew 5:43-48

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The story is told of a Baptist pastor during the American Revolution named Peter Miller. He lived in Pennsylvania and was a personal friend of George Washington – at that time the military general.

Also in Pennsylvania was a man named Michael Wittman, a man with an evil reputation, an opponent to the Revolution with a personal grudge against Pastor Miller. This man did all he could to humiliate and oppose Miller at every opportunity until one day he was arrested for treason and sentenced to death.

When Pastor Miller heard Wittman had been arrested and was standing trial before George Washington himself in Philadelphia he headed out on foot, 70 miles, to plead for the life of this enemy traitor.

At the hearing General Washington turned his request down saying “No, Peter, I cannot grant you the life of your friend.” To which Pastor Miller replied “My friend! He's the bitterest enemy I have.”

"What?" cried Washington. "You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in different light. I'll grant your pardon." And he did.¹

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Please open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5 starting in verse 43.

Today we come to the end of section one of the King's Speech; Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. And so far what we have seen has certainly encouraged the hungry soul, but that encouragement has come at a cost. And that is because what Jesus calls us to here is a radical life of discipleship empowered by the One who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets.

And verse 43 starts the fifth² of Jesus' five examples of what it means to live empowered by a fulfilled law. Before this Jesus commanded that His disciples put away anger and adultery and deception and justice seeking and instead work to look like Him. And each of these examples follow the same pattern. They start with a saying everyone agrees with, then Jesus gives a command no one is happy about, and finally He provides a couple examples of what living out His word looks like.

¹ Lynn Jost in “The Grace of Give” by Stephen Olford

² Others see Jesus giving 6 examples (citing verse 31 as the start of its own section) however I believe the key thought from verse 27 to 32 is “adultery” and Jesus just cites divorce and lust as two different ways adultery is committed.

And the fifth instance follows this pattern exactly. Jesus starts with the now familiar words: “You have heard that it was said” and then does something He hasn’t done up until this point.

Look at verse 43.

[Read Matthew 5:43]

Now the first part of what Jesus says here, like the four saying before this, is a direct quote from the Old Testament. Leviticus 19 tells us:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD (Leviticus 19:18)

But nowhere in the Old Testament does it specifically say we are to “hate our enemies.” So what is Jesus getting at here? Well, while these words do not appear in the Old Testament, the sentiment behind them is there and had become a common way of thinking in the first century.

Let me give you a couple examples. In Deuteronomy Moses warned Israel not to forgive the Ammonites and Moabites for their hostility against them saying:

No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, not even in the tenth generation.... Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live. (Deuteronomy 23:3;6)

Those are harsh words; you could even call them hateful words. But if that hasn’t convinced you consider some of David’s prayers throughout the Psalms. There are dozens of examples I could cite, but just listen to a few verses from Psalm 140 – I won’t sing them for you.

⁶I say to the LORD, “You are my God.”

Hear, LORD, my cry for mercy.

⁷Sovereign LORD, my strong deliverer,
you shield my head in the day of battle. (So far so good right?)

⁸Do not grant the wicked their desires, LORD;
do not let their plans succeed.

⁹Those who surround me proudly rear their heads; (Now here is where David really gets going)
may the mischief of their lips engulf them.

¹⁰May burning coals fall on them;
may they be thrown into the fire,
into miry pits, never to rise.

¹¹May slanderers not be established in the land;
may disaster hunt down the violent. (Psalm 140:6-11)

These are not words of forgiveness, David hated his enemies and prayed God would kill them. And it is words like these that led Israel to believe loving their neighbours and hating their enemies was alright.

Now with this raised I should just stop and speak to something really important when it comes to reading your Bible. The Bible is an interesting book in that it records both feats of faith and feats of failure often with very little commentary about whether these things were good or bad.

Usually when people write the history of their heroes they paint with rose coloured paint. But Israel painted its history as truthfully as they could. And that is because throughout the Bible there is only one hero. God is the hero of the Bible.

Sure there are men who called down fire from heaven, there are sea splitters and boat builders and giant slayers throughout its pages, but we also read that these same men were cowards and liars and drunkards and murderers. So if you are going to read the Bible the way it was meant to be read you must not make the mistake of taking the men and women in here as your heroes. They aren't the heroes of the Bible. The message of this book is that God takes broken men and woman no different from us and causes His kingdom to come and His will to be done through them. God is the only hero in this book.

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For those of you who have children or are involved in teaching Sunday school watch out for this because most Sunday school curriculum, especially Old Testament curriculum, falls into this. Bible stories get taken out of their context and children are urged to have faith like Elijah or love their friends like David did, in other words these stories are made into morals to learn rather than encounters with a God that transforms and uses broken people.

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One of my favorite stories in the Bible is the story of Elijah. He was one of the greatest prophets and miracle workers in the Old Testament. But the main reason I like him is for what the Apostle James says about him. He says:

Elijah was a person just like us. When he earnestly prayed that it wouldn't rain, no rain fell for three and a half years. (James 5:17)

Sure Elijah called fire down from heaven and stopped the rains, but Elijah isn't the hero of his story. He was a person just like us. Just a little later in his story Elijah was whining and asking God to strike him dead because he had nothing to eat or drink. Elijah was nothing special; he had no power that we don't have. God is the hero of His story.

And so people like Elijah and Moses and Noah and David get their names in the Bible not because they were great, but because God is great and He is in the business of taken broken people and making them new. If you have children teach them that. Don't tell them to try to be good – they can't, they are sinners just like you are – introduce them to Jesus who covers bad people with His righteousness and transforms their minds so that they look like Him. Can I hear an 'Amen'?

Ok, that rant was for free, let's get back to Matthew 5.

People in Jesus' day had slipped into error of following the examples of some of the characters in the Bible too closely, and they thought God wanted them to hate their enemies.

But Jesus had other ideas. Look at verse 44.

[Read Matthew 5:44]

If you have been around the church for any period of time you have probably heard the words "love your enemies" several times so it may not sound that out there, but what Jesus calls for here was totally contrary to what everyone thought and just as radical today as it was the day it was spoken.

You see, while we are fairly used to words like "love your enemies" we are also fairly familiar with words like (and see if you can finish this sentence). "You have to love everyone but you don't have to... like them."

Now of course this isn't in the Bible either, but there is a shred of truth to it – namely we aren't going to be best friends with everyone. But here is how this usually plays out. When we say "we have to love people but we don't necessarily have to like them" we absolve ourselves from the responsibility of being friendly. Instead of opening ourselves up in situations where we might get hurt again we say 'good-bye' and love them from a distance. Right?

But that is absolutely opposite to what Jesus is saying here. What Jesus calls us to isn't a mental exercise; it is an absolutely counter-cultural, supernatural outward action. And there are two parts to it in verse 44.

First Jesus calls us to love our enemies.

Once Jesus was describing what it looks like to love and He told a story about a "Good Samaritan".³ And if you heard Anthony Brown this last week you will remember that he gave us some insight into it. Anyway, in this story a Jewish traveler is attacked by bandits and left bloody and mostly dead on the side of the road.

³ Luke 10:25-37

Two men then pass him on the road, first a priest and then a Levite. Both see him in the ditch but keep going. And then a Samaritan comes by.

Now Samaritans hated Jews and Jews hated Samaritans but when the Samaritan saw the Jew in the ditch he stopped, bandaged his wounds, put him on his donkey, took him to an inn or the equivalent of a hospital and paid for his medical expenses – the Samaritan helped him, the Samaritan loved him.

This is the kind of love that Jesus calls His disciples to; we are called to love our enemies with an active love that actually helps them physically. Had the Samaritan walked by and thought loving things “I sure hope you get better quick, I hope those bandits don’t return and finish you off, I hope the sun doesn’t cook you, I hope a friend comes by and helps you” he would have been just as unloving as the priest and Levite.

So let go of the saying “We are called to love them, but we aren’t called to like them” because that leads to a passive kind of love that is nothing like the active love that Jesus requires of His followers. That’s the first counter-cultural, supernatural, outward action in verse 44.

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The second thing Jesus tells us to do is pray for those who persecute us. And this is just as radical.

Now David prayed for those who persecuted him, but that is not the kind of praying Jesus has in mind here. Some other translations read “bless those who curse you”, showing that these prayers are to be positive. But a more literal translation could read “pray on behalf of the people persecuting you.”⁴ We are to intercede for them.

And this brings out the substitutionary heart in Jesus’ words. Jesus calls us to do for our enemies what they are not doing for themselves. We are to pray on their behalf. So why do we do this?

When we pray for people who have hurt us (and that’s what an enemy is defined by here: anyone we have a strained or broken relationship with), we often talk about how our hearts change in the process – and that’s true. But that isn’t Jesus’ point here. The prayer we are to pray for our persecutors has nothing to do with us at all; we are to pray that God would not hold the sin they did to us against them. We are to pray God forgives them.

Where do I get this from?

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Let me show you. Last week we looked at verses 38 to 42 and talked about how every human being is born with an innate sense of justice. Children from the

⁴ Bruner, D. “The ChristBook: Matthew 1-12” (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub), 2004. pg 271

youngest ages understand when they are wronged and they seek justice. And this doesn't go away with age.

But as we saw last week we aren't to take justice into our own hands, we are to leave justice in God's hands and let Him repay. But Jesus' words in today's text build on this and take it one step further.

In the same context of justice Jesus now says "love your enemies and pray or intercede or advocate for them. This means asking God to grant them mercy instead of justice. Give up your pursuit of justice all together – don't take it into your own hands, and don't content yourself with leaving it in God's hands. Ask God for mercy, not justice, for your enemies.

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Now some of you have been seriously wronged in the past. And I don't want you to think I am treating this lightly – and Jesus isn't treating your pain lightly. Some of you have been raped or abused or neglected or all sorts of terrible things. And you live under the weight of other people's sins. You've been shaped by their actions.

If this is you Jesus' words here are actually good news. Jesus says His followers don't have to be defined by the actions of their enemies. Friends, your enemies don't have the right to tell you who you are. Instead meet Jesus and let Him tell you who He thinks you are.

Jesus loved us and died for us while we still hated Him, while we were nailing Him to the cross. But He didn't allow our hatred to define Him. Had He allowed that He would have felt sorry for Himself, but He didn't. He would have been compelled to defend Himself, but He didn't. Instead He acted, not in response to our hatred, but out of His love for us. And this counter-cultural, supernatural, outward action transformed some of us from enemies into friends.

And Jesus wants us to live in the same victory He experienced, not controlled by our enemies, but empowered by His love.

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Now that doesn't mean this is easy. Actually the ability to let go of the need for justice when we have been wronged and instead love our enemies and pray for their forgiveness is something no one in the world can do without the supernatural power of God coursing through them. But this is what Jesus did for us, and this power is what He offers us. As He hung on the cross absorbing our hatred He prayed:

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.
(Luke 23:34)

And Jesus fills His disciples with this same power. When Steven was being stoned to death we read:

Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60)

So if you are Jesus' disciple the same power that filled Jesus is available to you. Jesus empowers us to do everything He commands. And Here He says love your enemies and even pray on their behalf that God would not hold their actions against them.

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Back in verses 17 through 20 Jesus told us that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven we had to be more righteous than the Pharisees, and this is the fifth example of what that kind of righteousness looks like – and I think we all agree it's pretty intense. But in today's text Jesus offers us something He hasn't before – a motivation for why we should live this way beyond just doing what He says. Look at verse 45.

[Read Matthew 5:45]

Friends, it is when we love our enemies like God loved us that we prove we are His children.

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Now if this sounds like "works righteousness" – like we have to love in this insane way before God will accept us please remember the whole context of the Sermon on the Mount. Right from the beginning we saw that grace starts with God. The first three beatitudes give us a picture of receiving something from God, and only after we have received God's grace and been transformed by it are we called and enabled to live this grace out to the people around us.

Only after we have received grace does Jesus say:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
(Matthew 5:9)

So here at the end of chapter five (which is the end of the first of three parts in the King's Speech) Jesus brings us right back to the beginning. Jesus says if you want to live in the kingdom of heaven, here on earth and for eternity, then you need to be more righteous than the Pharisees. And you will do that by loving people – even loving, perhaps especially loving – your enemies like I loved Mine. And when we do that we prove that we are the Father's children because He has loved His enemies since Creation began.

Friends this is amazing: That sinners like us can be children of God!

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And then in verse 46 and 47 Jesus gives two clarifying examples to describe the love He is talking about.

[Read Matthew 5:46-47]

Jesus says when we love “naturally” that’s nothing special. When Elliana gets up at 3am for the third night in a row her parents (usually Nikki) gets up and comforts her and takes her to the potty and changes her clothes. But we don’t get brownie points with God when we do this because every decent parent takes care of their children. Even drug dealers and mafia love their own. Jesus says His followers are called to something more than natural.

We are called to something more because God loved His enemies so much that, while we still hated Him, He sent His only Son that whoever at all would believe in Him would not die but have eternal life.⁵ So we are to hand out the love we have received to those around us without regard to whether they deserve it. And we are to do this with the hope that our enemies will meet Jesus through us.

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Friends, do you share Jesus’ heart? Do you want your enemies to meet Jesus and be forgiven? This isn’t a natural thing to want, it’s a miracle that Jesus wants to do in our hearts.

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Jesus concludes with verse 48.

[Read Matthew 5:48]

Now if you take this verse on its own it can only be an impossibly delusional command – be perfect? Come on! But this verse does not exist on its own so don’t read it that way. It is the last verse in the first section of the Sermon and this is not a mistake.

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It is important to note that in the Greek there is both promise and command in this verse. It is a promise because the first word of the sentence; “Be” in the NIV is in the future tense. So literally translated it says “You will be perfect”. Jesus knows you aren’t perfect right now, but the Bible tells us that

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:6)

Jesus is committed to perfecting His disciples, and that’s good news.

But lest we think this is all promise the rest of the verse is a command. That means we have the responsibility to partner with God in our journey towards perfection. We have to work out our salvation.⁶

Now there is more that could be said here, but to do that, I think, would be to miss Jesus’ main point.

Jesus started His section on the Laws back in verses 17 to 20 where He said:

⁵ Paraphrase of John 3:16

⁶ Philippians 2:12

For I tell you unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees... you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matthew 5: 20)

And then He gave us five examples of what it looks like to live under the power of a fulfilled law. And each of the examples left us reeling. In each situation we are called to leave behind the natural and live the supernatural – in a word we are to look like Jesus. And this fifth example is no different.

And in each of these examples Jesus showed that looking like Him doesn't mean looking religious. The Pharisees, who had given their lives to religion, were shown to be a bunch of murdering, adultery-committing, lying, justice-condemned sinners. And really the most sincere people are like this – and we are like this too.

And so it turns out that to be more righteous than the Pharisees has nothing to do with how accurately we follow the rules and instead everything to do with our poverty of spirit. And that's the context of everything Jesus has said here:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:3)

For us to be more righteous than the Pharisees means we must come to Jesus hungry for Him to make us perfect. We have to ask Him to come and fill us with His righteousness and transform us by His perfection.

And the great mystery is this: that while perfection is impossible on our own, Jesus does fill those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and God calls sinners His children when, empowered by His love, we give up justice in favor of making peace with our enemies.

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And this is what happened to Wittman. When George Washington changed his mind and granted Pastor Miller his request Miller took Wittman home a Jesus-transformed friend.