

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Matthew 5:43-48

It is a well-known fact that Jesus' teaching stresses the commandment to love. In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus points out that the extent of its application must be universal and not limited to certain people. This is what He says.

*Matthew 5:43. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
44 "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you,
and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,*

45 "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.

46 "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

47 "And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?

48 "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Transforming the human nature

'You have heard that it was said,' the Lord Jesus says, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemy. If you can love your enemy, there is no one else that you cannot love.' In other words, becoming a Christian is something so revolutionary that it involves a total change in our way of thinking.

You see, loving our enemies is against human nature. We naturally oppose and hate our enemies, or at least, we treat them with a cold shoulder and keep our distance. Here Jesus challenges us to love all, even our enemies.

The whole Sermon on the Mount depicts the behavior that Jesus expects of every citizen of the kingdom of God. 'You want to be My disciple?' Jesus says, 'then be ready for a drastic change in your attitude. Before you were like this. Now you are going to be like that. Your whole attitude must become divine. You become very different from those who have not come to God, who have not repented of their sins, who have not been born again.' Because that is what it means. To be born again means that you become a totally new person. And therefore, a fundamental change happens to you that we describe by the term 'born again.'

So we are not talking about some personality reform. Christianity speaks of a radical transformation. The Lord's revolution is far more complete than any change that you can see in this

world. And this can only be accomplished by God's power. If God is not working in us, we are preaching the gospel in vain because all that we are doing is simply to provide some nice philosophical ideas, ethical ideas, moral ideas, which are impossible to fulfill. God has to change our life so completely that we become a new person. And when people look at a godly Christian, they can immediately see that he is a son of God who is in heaven.

Loving the enemy in the OT

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' Is this a quotation of the OT? We know that the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor,' is taught in the OT. It is a shortened form of Leviticus 19:18 where we read, 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but **you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.***

I must point out to you that already in the OT, there is some reference to a kind of loving of the enemy. Take for example Exodus 23:4-5.

Exodus 23:4. "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again.

5 "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.

If an animal is in trouble, even though it belongs to your enemy, you have the responsibility to help that animal. Now, if we are bound to do good to our enemy's animal, how much more must we do good to our enemy himself. Listen to Proverbs 25:21-22.

Proverbs 25:21. If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;

22 For you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.

Here kindness is expressed directly to the enemy himself. This is a sort of anticipation of Jesus' teaching, *Love your enemies.*

Hating the enemy in the OT

What about 'hating your enemies?' Is this also taught in the OT? I would advise you not to be too quick to say that it is not taught. Surprised? Look at this passage. Psalm 139:21-22.

Psalm 139:21. Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?

*22 **I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.***

David wrote this psalm and he says that he 'hated' the enemy. And he goes on to say in v. 23,

Psalm 139:23. Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties;

24 and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

It follows from this that David did not see anything wicked in hating the enemies. *I hate them with perfect hatred.* It could not be stated more forcefully. This is perfect hatred. You can't be more perfect than that.

Consider this other passage. Psalm 26:5.

*Psalm 26:5. **I have hated the assembly of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.***

Here the psalmist states clearly that he hated the wicked people. He does not want to have any kind of dealings with evildoers. Or, take this other verse. Psalm 31:6.

Psalm 31:6. I have hated those who regard useless idols; but I trust in the Lord.

‘I have hated those who believe in vain idols.’ Again, we have another situation where hatred is expressed toward some kind of enemy. How is that different from Jesus saying, *You have heard that it was said, ‘Hate your enemy?’* It seems to me that it is very close.

As we search through the OT, we begin to realize that there is a hating on the part of man that is acceptable to God. Man must have an aversion to evil. And you will also notice that hatred and enemies often appear together in the Scriptures to describe those who are hostile to God. Take our first example, *I hate them with perfect hatred.* David did not say that he hates his own enemies. He said that he hates God’s enemies, those who rise up against God. Why did he hate these people? Because they disregarded God’s law. They persisted in doing evil. David did not hate them as his personal enemies. He hated them as those who hate God.

Love: the distortion and the rectification

And from there, it did not take much for the religious leaders to teach that you can hate all those who do not belong to the Jewish community. You are allowed to hate anyone who is not a member of your own race and of your own religion. Why? Because they don’t follow God’s law. And if they don’t live according to God’s law, they are God’s enemies. And therefore, I am justified to hate them. You can see how subtle this has become. The religious leaders have twisted the OT to their own convenience by limiting the meaning of the word ‘neighbor.’ In their mind, a neighbor is a Jew. This one, you must love. If he is not a Jew, you have the permission to hate him.

And it is at this point that Jesus says, *Love your enemies.* What Jesus is doing is to broaden the narrow definition that the religious leaders have given to the word ‘neighbor.’ Love your neighbor, and that includes your enemies. A neighbor, in God’s vocabulary, is not necessarily a member of our own race or religion. It includes everyone, even our enemies.

The reason for this is given in v. 45: because God loves His enemy. How does the Lord Jesus establish this statement? He uses an illustration that we can see for ourselves. He says, ‘You see the sunshine? God causes the sun to shine on Christians and non-Christians. Look at the rain. Does a Christian farmer get more rain than the non-Christian? No. The rain comes down on both without discrimination.’ This is a good example of what we call God’s common grace. God gives all mankind the benefits of sunshine and rain. There is no difference between the justified and the condemned. And since His love does not discriminate, our love must not discriminate against anyone either. We must love both the just and the unjust.

Becoming a child of God

When we do that, loving without discrimination, it makes us a child of God. *That you may be sons of your Father in heaven.* It would be more accurate to say, *That you may **become** sons of your Father in heaven.* The Greek word that is translated by the verb ‘be’ is the same as in Matthew 4:3 where the devil said to Jesus, *Command that these stones **become** bread,* and not, ‘Command that these stones be bread.’ I insist on this technical point because it highlights the necessity of a transformation. Something is transformed into something else.

So here in v. 45, it is better to read, *That you may **become** sons of your Father in heaven.* What does that mean? Well, we saw in our introduction that Christianity has to do with a completely

new way of thinking. The behavior of human nature is to react harshly against the enemy. Jesus asks us to change that attitude. We are to show kindness to all, both good and bad people. You don't love people just because you like their face or their character. You love people because you have a new nature inside of you that enables you do good to all, even your enemies.

Becoming a Christian involves a transformation in which your way of thinking is utterly changed. Paul says the same thing in Romans 12:2. *Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* You stand out in the world as someone different. You are so different because God's transforming power has made you to be born again. You have been transformed into a new kind of person, with a new way of thinking, with God's way of thinking. And so, you deliberately love as God loves. In loving even the unjust, you prove whose child you are. The love that you express proves that you are a child of God. God has empowered you to become His son.

That is why John says in John 1:12, *But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God.* If you believe in God, God gives you the power to become His child. And then, John goes on to say in v. 13, *Who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.* The children of God are born again, not of natural descent, but of the will of God. And having become utterly different from the non-Christians through this new birth, a child of God is able to love his enemies.

Matthew 5:46. "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"

Love is not restricted to Christians. Sinners can certainly love sinners. And sinners can do good to sinners. 'But if you love only those who love you,' Jesus says, 'what more are you doing than the rest of mankind? Don't even the Gentiles do that? Something more is required of you.'

Matthew 5:48. "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

'Perfection' here does not refer to a moral perfection in an absolute sense. The idea is perfection of purpose. It has to do with a goal, a purpose, an aim. We cannot be morally perfect. Nobody is perfect in the sense that he does not have any fault in himself. We all have weaknesses and shortcomings. But what we must aim to be, by the grace of God, is to be perfect in love. That is why I say that it is a perfection of purpose. It is not a perfection of character, i.e., being without sin. It is a goal to attain. In our attitude toward other people, we aim to be perfect in love.

A test of faith

When we look at all this teaching, we tend to feel somewhat uncertain about our ability to fulfill it. We say, 'This teaching is almost impossible to follow. It is not always easy to love our friends. How are we going to love our enemy?' Well, remember this: the Christian faith will always be put to the test. And here, the Lord Jesus is definitely testing our faith. He is saying, 'If you are my disciple, go out there and love your enemy.' This is so characteristic of Jesus' teaching. He wants to see our faith in action.

You remember the story of the man who was born blind in John 9? Did Jesus simply heal him? No. He put clay on his eyes and said to him, 'Go down to the pool of Siloam and wash your eyes.' Now, think about it for a minute. Try to imagine the many thoughts that could have crossed the mind of the blind. 'Why do you put all this clay on my eyes? Why do you ask me to go to the pool of Siloam? If you have the power to take away my blindness, why don't you just heal me right now?'

Why is the Lord Jesus doing it this way? It is a test of faith. He wants to put our faith to the test. That is how He works.

Take this other example. In John 5, we read about a man who was paralyzed for 38 years. What does Jesus say to him? ‘You want to be healed? Well, take up your bed and walk.’ ‘What! I have been crippled for 38 years. And now, you ask me to take up my bed and walk?! Is this a joke?’ No, it is a test of faith.

In the same way, Jesus is telling us, ‘Go out there and love your enemy.’ A test of faith. Faith means this. ‘Lord, at your word, if you say so, I will do it. I don’t know how, but I will obey your word.’ That is living faith. That is perfect faith. And that should be the attitude of every true Christian.

Moving into a new area of life

The Lord Jesus has given us this wonderful teaching because He wants us to enter as new creatures into a new area of life. This new area of life is the area of love. He wants us to move out of the area of selfishness and hate, and move into this new area of love, of God’s love. At first, you might feel like a stranger walking in a foreign country. ‘Love is not the land in which I normally live. But here I am. By faith, I have entered into this new country, into the kingdom of God, into this new land of love. I don’t know how to conduct myself. But I know that God is there and He will guide me.’

It says in 1John 4:16, *And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.* Think about those words very deeply. God, as to His character, as to His nature, is love. And he who abides, i.e., he who lives in love, who conducts his life in love, lives in God. And God lives in him. This is the new area of life that Jesus invites us to enter into.

Don’t cling to the old country, to the old way of life that you were accustomed to. Don’t be like the Israelites who lived in Egypt for so long that they could not get used to another way of life. They were constantly longing to go back to Egypt. And some Christians seem to be doing exactly the same thing. They are still attached to the old selfish way. They are still following the thinking of this world. They still want the onions and the garlic that are in Egypt. Salvation is not just a matter of getting out of Egypt because getting out of Egypt only leads to the wilderness. The place we want to go is the land of promise. That is where God’s promises are to be found. We want to enter into this new area of God’s love and stay there because he who lives in love will find that he is living in God and God is living in him. We cannot find a better place to live.