

Going Deeper: Shining on the Evil and the Good
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
January 31,2021- AM Service
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Matthew 5:43-48

Today I will read the last of Jesus' "You have heard it said" sayings from the Sermon on the Mount. 6 times he says "You have heard it said" and then he quotes an Old Testament law. He follows with a teaching that goes beyond that law, a teaching that goes deeper, a teaching that pushes his righteousness down into the deep corners of our heart. Our passage this morning is the last of these 6 "You have heard it said." Let's listen again as Jesus pushes us deeper. You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Where would Jesus' listeners have heard that? Not in the law of God. The command to hate your enemies is not in the Old Testament. "Love your neighbor" is in there. Leviticus 19:18. But there is no law calling people to hate their enemies. So what's going on? Is Jesus' quote wrong?

While there may not be any direct call to hate your enemy, there are some texts that push in that direction. Do you know the imprecatory Psalms? Those are the Psalms that call for God to rain down destruction upon the wicked, often in graphic terms. Psalm 58: "Break the teeth of the wicked!" Psalm 31: "Lord I hate those who cling to worthless Idols!" Psalm 55: "Let death take my enemies; let them go down to the grave alive." And Psalm 139-a Psalm that we all love, the one about how God knit us together in our mother's womb and how we are fearfully and wonderfully made-ends with the Psalmist saying, "Do I not hate those who hate you Lord...I have nothing but hatred for them."

So, while there are no direct calls to hate your enemy, there are more than a few Psalms that express hatred towards the enemy, Psalms that outwardly express hope that our enemy would suffer.

By Jesus' time, some of the religious leaders had turned these Psalms into commands. I don't know if you've heard of the Qumram community. The Qumram community was a strict religious group that had a settlement on the shores of the dead sea. Their teachings were influential in some Jewish circles, and they gave this command to their followers: "You must love all the sons of light, but you must hate all the sons of darkness" (1QS 1.9-11). So while the Old Testament may not have said it directly, the people who are sitting on the hillside with Jesus would have heard the imprecatory Psalms, and they would have heard many religious leaders who said, "Love your neighbor, but hate your enemy."

Frankly, every generation hears some version of this command. We've all heard it said: "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Because the call to love your neighbors and hate your enemies has been the go-to strategy for creating group loyalty throughout history. Love your neighbor but hate your enemy has been a really effective way to bring people together in a community and mobilize them for action. You can build a tight community when you get people to love each other and share a common goal. But when you add hatred of a common enemy, you take loyalty to a whole new level. When love of the in group is combined with hatred of an outgroup you get a commitment that is something like fanatical.

You see this dynamic in sports fans. You create a community of fans when you get people to love the team and cheer for the same team. You talk together about the upcoming game. You

tell stories of the great players of the past. You tailgate before the game and sing the fight song together. All of that is the love your neighbor side of things. But the most fanatical fans are bonded not only by love, but by hatred. By loathing of the opposition. By stories of the terrible things that those dirty cheaters at Ohio State do to keep winning.

Michigan/Ohio State is a great example of the dynamic. Really fanatical Michigan fans aren't just united by their love of Michigan football, they are bonded by their hatred of Ohio State. Really fanatical Ohio State fans aren't just bonded by their love of the Buckeyes, they are bonded by their hatred of the Wolverines. Woody Hayes, the legendary Buckeye coach, would only refer to his rivals as "the school up north." He wouldn't even say "Michigan." And more recently, when Brady Hoke coached the Wolverines, he called his rivals simply "Ohio," dropping the word "State". There's the dynamic: Love your neighbors and hate your enemies.

In the realm of sports, it's relatively innocent. But in other places it's much more dangerous. Because that ancient pattern is the pattern of tribalism. Love your neighbor and hate your enemies is like the first commandment of tribalism. When you have a tribal mentality, you see the world as 'us' and 'them'. This is my tribe. I love them. I will support them no matter what! I will fight for them. Those other people are my enemies. I hate them. I will fight them.

Tribalism has been an effective tool of the devil. Tribalism has been the source of war and genocide and terrorism. In Nazi Germany you have the embodiment of love your neighbor, hate your enemy. Love of neighbor, love of country, love of your fellow Aryan German dialed up as high as it could go. German people tearfully celebrating their proud heritage, coupled with a cultivated hatred against all enemies of Germany, specifically Jews and communists. It was really effective. It marshalled the energy of the German people into a fanatical machine. Too often, tribalism is a kind of default way that we sinful humans build community. Tribalism was part of the dark energy of the Russian revolution, the Rwandan massacre, the French revolution. Tribalism is the energy behind 'cancel culture.' And tribalism is the dark force at work in many corners of our modern political landscape.

Jesus tells us that tribalism is the corruption of true community. In that sense it's like two things Jesus has already mentioned in his sermon. Contempt is the corruption of legitimate anger. Lust is the corruption of the good gift of romantic love. Tribalism, with its call to hate your enemy, is the corruption of true community. Jesus says, "This is not how to do community. This is the way the tax collectors and the pagans do community. This is not what I intended. I have a better way for you. A deeper way." "You have heard it said, love your neighbors and hate your enemies, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. That way you will be living as children of your heavenly Father."

So Jesus envisions a different community for his followers, a deeper community. Let's call this community a **Περισσον (perisson)** community. **Περισσον** is a Greek word found in verse 47. It's translated as 'more.' It's a word that also means 'beyond what is anticipated, exceeding expectation; more abundant.' It's the same word that Jesus uses in John 10:10 when he says, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly (**περισσον**)." Something is **περισσον** when it abounds, when it goes beyond the usual. When it makes you stop in your tracks because it's so remarkable. Jesus calls us to a love that is truly **περισσον**. He is calling us to an ethic that actively and consciously blesses those who curse us and prays for those who persecute us. Not those who dislike you, those who persecute you. Pray for those who are actively trying to harm you. This love abounds, because it doesn't stop where tribal love stops-

at your enemy's fence-it bounds over that fence and pours itself out on him. If we can be the kind of community who loves like that, we will abound, we will be remarkable. People will stop and take notice.

Let me offer a few words about how we might be people of this overflowing **περισσόν** love and resist the temptations of tribalism. First, as you consider Jesus words, ask yourself the question: Am I part of any groups, or communities that train me to hate another group of people? Am I part of any group where membership and identity involves sustained animosity towards those people? Where the leaders and spokespeople of the group are constantly speaking hatefully about others. Not just that we disagree with those people, but those people are evil scum? If so, may I push you to reconsider your membership in that community. This group could be a political group. Or this group could be a community of friends in your high school. Are you part of a community where your bond is shared dislike? And if you are, you might want to consider your membership.

Second, loving your enemy doesn't mean being soft on sin, tolerant of evil or comfy with injustice. Jesus isn't giving a tripped-out hippy speech: "We are all brothers man let's just love on each other!" There are enemies in this world. There are enemies of the gospel in this world. We must resist them. We must call out sin, confront evil and fight injustice. But love must be the beginning, middle and end of our fight. We love our enemies as we confront them. And it can't just be a love in theory, it must be love in action. Love them in such a way that they know you love them and that the rest of the world can see it too.

Third, Jesus suggests that the best way to love your enemies is to pray for them. In my experience, every Christian knows that we are supposed to pray for our enemies. But in practice, most of us don't. Lent is coming soon. Maybe as a spiritual practice for Lent you could pray for your enemy. Pick a specific enemy. Maybe that's a political or cultural figure who makes you gnash your teeth. Pray for that person. Better yet, maybe that's someone at work or in your neighborhood who is a constant source of opposition. Pray for them specifically and pray for them abundantly. Let your prayer be **περισσόν**. Let your love overflow the normal human boundaries of affection. Here's another possibility: If you are a young family, at your mealtime prayers, pray for your enemies. Pray for them generally and maybe have your children name someone in society or someone at school with whom they have a hard time. Pray for that person.

Finally, this, and if you remember nothing else about the **περισσόν** love that Jesus calls us to, remember this: when we love our enemies, when we practice **περισσόν** love, we are loving like our heavenly Father. I've just given you some suggestions about how to practice **περισσόν** love, but it's hard to just will yourself into praying for your enemy. If your resources for loving your neighbor involve you gritting your teeth and clenching your fists, and saying to yourself, "Okay Peter, you can do this. Let's love all the annoying people." No, the best way to love your enemy is to turn your face toward your heavenly Father and realize that every day, every hour, every moment, this is how our heavenly Father loves you. Jesus says we should love our enemies, because God loves his enemies. He causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good. He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Rain, sunshine, laughter, romance, friendship, music, art, food... these things abound in our world. Our abundant God pours them

out on friend and foe alike. Common grace, spread with boundless prodigality. He doesn't measure out his blessings in coffee spoons; they abound. They are **περισσον**.

Jesus mentions rain and sunshine as examples of how the Father loves enemies, but I can think of another example. The Greek word for enemy is **ekthros**. Jesus tells us to love our **ekthro**i. That word also shows up in Romans 5:10. Remember what Paul says there? God shows his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, while we were still enemies-**ekthro**i-of God, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son. When Paul pictures God loving enemies, he doesn't just picture rain and sunshine, he thinks of the cross. He thinks of Jesus dying for us while we were still spitting at him. So we are the enemies. Enemy love saved you. Enemy love saved me. When that becomes clear to your heart, you see that God has already given you the grace to do this. You don't have to create this love. He already poured it into you. He has already poured it into me. So as we try to be a community which practices this extraordinary, **περισσον** love, let's finish this morning by having the apostle Paul point to the love of God. He doesn't use the word **περισσον** in these verses; he actually uses the word **υπερπερισσον** (hyperperisson)-not just more, but exceedingly more. Hyper-more. Paul says I want you to "know this love that surpasses knowledge-that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

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