

Love Conquers All 3-14-04

Matthew 5:43-48 (NIV)

⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

We've come to the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Here we find the very essence of the Christian life. Almost everyone knows this is the focal point of Jesus' teaching. In Japan, with less than 1% of the people claiming to be Christian, if you ask a person on the street what Jesus taught, they will say, "To love your enemies." Look at all that has been said up to this point, and this sums it up. Be merciful, bless your persecutors, forsake anger and lust, be salt and light, mean what you say and say what you mean, and give generously. The Sermon on the Mount, the whole of Jesus' teachings, hinges on this passage.

The Apostle Paul realized this and wrote, ⁸"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." Romans 13:8-10 (NIV) Paul says we should only have one continual debt, loving one another. When that is done, all is done.

Jesus began our text for today like many of the previous ones, by quoting the Law and an expression that had been added. Love your neighbor and hate your enemies. The first half of the expression is from Leviticus 19:18. The second half cannot be found in Scripture, but was probably a common expression of the day. The Jewish person of Jesus' day thought the reference to neighbors in the Old Testament meant other Jews. One man asked Jesus point blank, "Who is my neighbor?" In story form answer, Jesus explained that your neighbor is anyone in need, even if he is from a culture you may despise. (Luke 10:29-37)

Here again, Jesus corrects man's misunderstanding of God's word. I hope we are getting the point. We can read God's word and get whatever we want out of it, or we can ask for the mind of Christ that we may see the Spirit's application to our lives. We often read it looking for loopholes, but Jesus' sees the Father's holy applications. Oh, please don't look for loopholes as you read this one, because this is the key to all God's instructions to us. God is telling us through His only Son that if we are to be His children, we must love not only our friends and fellow citizens, but our enemies as well. ⁴⁴But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ^{45a} that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

Commented [notes1]: ²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"
³⁰In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.
³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.
³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.
³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.
³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.
³⁵The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'
³⁶"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"
³⁷The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." Luke 10:29-37 (NIV)

To understand what Jesus is saying we must understand this word "love". There are a number of Greek words for love. *Storgi* is a familial love. It is the love of parent for a child, and the child for the parent. *Eros* is the love a man for a woman. It is the passion of human love. *Philia* is the love for one's closest and truest friends. But Jesus is not using any of these. He is not asking you to love your enemy like family. He is not asking you to love like a dear friend, and certainly not like a mate. He is asking you to *agape* your enemy. It is an indomitable kindness and concern. It is an unbeatable compassion and goodwill. It expects nothing in return; on the contrary, it endures through all kinds of abuse and ungrateful responses. It is the kind of love that God has had for you, but not only you, but for all mankind. For God so *agapan* (loved) the world that He gave His only Son... For God has such an unbeatable compassion and goodwill for you and every individual you know, that He gave His only Son. (John 3:16) His love does not lessen when man is abusive and ungrateful. His love is an indomitable kindness.

God doesn't play favorites; He is equally good to all.

^{45b}*He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

He sends His blessing of sunshine and rain on those who love Him and those who hate Him. He knows that they know not what they do. Their hatred cannot conquer His love. On the contrary, His love conquers them.

This is God's love that does not come naturally to us. Our love is easily conquered, even by our brothers and sisters in Christ! May God help us grow up. (Ephesians 4:15) This love comes when we choose to cooperate with His love within us. We find it when we pray for our enemy, just as Jesus said. "Pray for those who persecute you." Then we find the heart of Christ for them, that unconquerable love. Only He can help us conquer our natural tendency to be angry, bitter, and defensive. (1 Peter 2:1) It is His love that conquers our heart's old attitudes and replaces them with His. (1 John 4:17-19) When we bring the person to the throne of God we find that bitterness dies, and love is born. You cannot hate others in the presence of God, but you can refuse to come into His presence. (John 3:19-21)

Once we find God's love for them we can endure their persecution, their insults and lack of receptivity. Then we resemble our heavenly Father. We can bless them. We can be kind when they are harsh. We can exhibit the love of the Father, and they will see the life and love of Jesus in us. (2 Corinthians 4:10) As the Apostle Paul said in that famous chapter 1 Corinthians 13 verse 8, "Love conquers all." Or as the NIV puts it, "Love never fails."

It is in having this unconquerable love for others that we are like our Father in heaven, and like His Son who gave His life for us. The Jews used the expression "son of" like an adjective. A son of peace is a peaceful man. (Luke 10:6) A son of consolation is a consoling man. (Acts 4:36) So, then, a son of God would be a godly man. Just as Christ's love conquers our old nature as we cooperate with His Spirit, so our reflection of Christ's love conquers our detractors and persecutors.

Commented [notes2]: ¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. Ephesians 4:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ¹Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 1 Peter 2:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: ¹⁷In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. ¹⁸There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:17-19 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." John 3:19-21 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 2 Corinthians 4:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: ⁶And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again. Luke 10:6 (KJV)

Commented [notes9]: ³⁶And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, Acts 4:36 (KJV)

Why are more people not coming to Christ? This is a hard saying; can you receive it? It is because **we** do not express *agape* love. Jesus has described it in these passages. It refuses to become angry or lash out with unkind words. It will not be bitter towards enemies, but will bless them. It turns the other cheek, refusing to retaliate. It gives to the person that asks. It is like Jesus! And when people see Jesus' love, they are drawn to Him!

Now in saying that, you might think I'm talking about being a doormat. Not at all! I'm talking about being like Jesus. He spoke against the sin, but loved the sinner. He didn't give the Pharisees an inch, because they needed to hear the hard truth. (See Matthew 23) You see, real love is concerned about the other person's welfare not just defending ourselves or winning an argument. That genuine loving concern dictates our response. Jesus responded with anger toward sin and exposed it in people's lives because He loved them. He saw sin was destroying them. Do you think they wanted to hear that? No way! They hated it, but it was the best medicine He could have given to lovingly help them. He did not retaliate, or get even, or try to make Himself more important than someone else, but out of that indomitable love we have been speaking of, said what they most needed to hear. Agape love is focused on the cure, never vengeance. It is never to get even, but always to make whole.

⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Are we any different from the world? If we aren't, we are just playing at Christianity. Barna's statistics on the similarities in Christian and non-Christian life-style should tell us that a lot of us have a form of religion but deny its power to change our lives. (2 Timothy 3:5)

Of course you can be nice to those who are nice to you. Of course you can be generous to those who agree with you. It is when you face hatred, persecution and injustice that your relationship with Christ is really tested. It is when that person insists on telling you that you don't know what you are talking about or only their opinion is right. What will you do? How will you react? You have two choices. Stand up for yourself, your ego and pride, or stand up in Jesus with the love that never fails. React naturally or supernaturally. It all depends on your vital living relationship with Jesus. This testing is when people are most likely to have an encounter with Jesus who lives in you and expresses Himself through you. Or will they see merely an expression of religion.

I don't like the tests. Do you? They expose my immaturity. They reveal my selfishness. It is only when I switch my focus to what Christ is doing in me that I can be joyful as James says we should be. (James 1:2) When we choose to yield to the love of Christ within us toward our brothers and sisters and then toward those we meet in the world, in spite of differences and things that hurt us, then we will become effective witnesses. Then Wayside Chapel will be filled with worshippers. They will be impure and imperfect people just like us, but the love of God will win their hearts to a relationship with Jesus. We can fill this sanctuary with people, but if they don't encounter the love of Christ in us, it could even be detrimental to their spiritual life to have them come here. The love of Christ must conquer us first, and then we can be

Commented [notes10]: ⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. 2 Timothy 3:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: ²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, James 1:2 (NIV)

used to demonstrate His love to others. Then we will yield to the power of the Holy Spirit touching others through us. (Acts 1:8)

We can have a nice Christian club, or we can get serious about yielding to the love of Christ. (1 John 2:9) We can submit our hearts to His gentleness and patience that flow from His love. We can! He said we can. We have failed in the past, but the past is in the past! I can't express the love of God to Eileen. She is now in God's presence. I'll have to wait until I get there. I wish I had given of myself more unselfishly to her. By God's grace I will give myself more unselfishly to you.

God's word declares, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!"
Philippians 4:13

"It is no longer I that live, but Christ that lives in me. And the life I now live I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me."

Galatians 2:20

⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NIV)

Because we are healed by His stripes, we can choose to love!

I do choose. I choose to love you and seek your best interest above my own. Will you join me in that commitment? I choose to die to myself and love Jesus first and to love you as I love myself. I know that makes us vulnerable. We have all been hurt because we decided to love others. But it is either going on living a selfish meaningless existence or living for my Savior, trusting His Word, and believing His promises. That is of eternal importance.

In this last verse Jesus mentions the concept of reward. We will focus on that next week as it is repeated 5 times in just 6 verses. Jesus is telling us that if we don't live supernatural lives of love, we won't have a reward in heaven. If we do let agape flow through us, we will have a reward. Heaven is going to be more wonderful than I can imagine, but add to that a reward and it just shows the amazing generosity of God. It is His love, but we get rewarded for just yielding to it and letting it flow through us for our own good and the benefit of others.

⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Is Jesus saying I have to be as perfect as God? Let us look at the word that is translated as "perfect". *teleios* is used in the case of a perfect sacrificial lamb, in other words it has no blemishes. It is used of a man who has grown to full stature. A student who has passed his course is *teleios*. It is to become fully functional for the intended purpose.

Jesus is telling us that we must love with that unconquerable goodwill toward others as the Father does. That's God's intention for us. John echoes Jesus' sentiment.

Commented [notes12]: ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
Acts 1:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: ⁹Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.
1 John 2:9 (NIV)

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 1 John 3:16 (NIV)

It's easier to lay your life down in death than it is to die to yourself day by day to serve others in love. Jesus was a living demonstration of both.

Grow up into the love of Christ so that you can be what you were designed to be. That is what we have been studying in the Purpose Driven Life. We start with the love of God in our hearts demonstrated in worship. Our second purpose flows out of the first. You were made for a family, the family of God. Love your brothers. Give up your rights. If you are more mature, give up your right to be the one acknowledged as the one that is right. Speak the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:15) And go one more step; lay down your life for your brothers and sisters. (John 15:13)

Until we are willing to go there, we will see little substantive change. Church, we have made some wonderful changes. We have had some wonderful new additions to our fellowship. God has sovereignly drawn some blessed brothers and sisters here. Our guests often comment on what a loving, friendly church we have. Now, what will we do with what has been invested in our fellowship? Will we go even further in giving ourselves in love for one another and those for whom Christ died?

The third reason God created you is to be like Jesus. God created man in His own image. That image was marred by sin. Now the Holy Spirit desires to transform you back into the likeness of Christ. What does that look like? It looks like love that loves so much that it is willing to lay its life down for the one that is loved. Be perfect like your heavenly Father is perfect by loving saint and sinner alike. Show your likeness to Him by seeking man's highest good, regardless of what they do to you. Consider how He displayed His love for you on the cross, and you will want to respond by demonstrating that love for others.

*When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.
Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far to small.
Love so amazing so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*

We can't let this be just a sermon that tickled our ears and stimulated our minds. We must let it grip our hearts and determine that by the grace of God we will love one another, preferring one another above ourselves. (Philippians 2:3) We must allow Christ's command to ring in our ears, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." We must choose to not only love our brothers, but our enemies as well, seeking their highest good. The Apostle made that choice. *For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. 2 Corinthians 4:11 (NIV)* Will you die to yourself that the life of Christ and the power of His love might be revealed in your mortal body? That is growing up into our intended purpose. That is what He originally designed us to do. That will change our lives and our fellowship into God's instrument to affect our town. Count the cost. (Luke 14:28) Make a choice, and then rely on the power of the Holy Spirit living in you to 'live it' in the difficult circumstances of your daily life. We can choose! Will you?

Commented [notes14]: ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. Ephesians 4:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: ¹³Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Philippians 2:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: ²⁸"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? Luke 14:28 (NIV)