

**“Our Relationship with the Torah and Our Selves:
Love without Limit” (Matt 5:43-48; 6:1-4)**

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A. Introduction

Today we address three themes: love, being children of God, and imitation of God.

B. Love Your Enemies

The passage we read this morning on loving enemies is the most important and most difficult of commands.¹

1. Old saying: “Love neighbors, hate enemies” (43)

As with all the six sayings in Matthew 5, Jesus begins the sixth with a quote from tradition and then he qualifies it. He quotes Lev 19:17-18, regarding loving fellow Israelites and sojourners who live in the land of Israel. Jesus affirms the Torah. He says:

5:43 You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

However, there is something odd about the rest of Jesus’ quotation. There is nothing in the OT about “hating your enemy.”

Most people and most cultures assume we are to hate our enemy. That was true of the Jews during the time of Jesus. We can imagine Jewish Zealots, those who wanted to preserve Jewish culture, hated the Roman occupation forces. For example, Jews living at Qumran anticipated a cataclysmic war with the enemies of Israel. One of their sacred texts—1QS 1:10—states that members of the sect are to “hate all the sons of darkness.”

Although the statement, “hate your enemy,” is not in the OT, it seems to be part of our DNA or our cultural DNA (memes).² When someone opposes us, we naturally want to fight back, defend ourselves, meet violence with violence, hate with hate. Right? That is part of our lower nature. But Jesus is calling us to a higher nature.

2. New saying: “Love enemies, pray for persecutors” (44)

Jesus gives a new saying that doesn’t contradict the old saying, but enlarges it. He says:

¹ So Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 99.

² Like biological genes, “memes” are units of cultural information that are passed on from person to person by songs, stories, beliefs, fashions, technology, language, etc. Coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976.

5:44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

In this way, the saying about loving one's "neighbor" attains the widest possible connotation so that "neighbor" now includes one's enemy!

a. What does love mean?

This is clarified by the context. "One is to pray for enemies and do good to them and greet them."³ While not excluding emotions, Jesus is primarily focused on actions that benefit others. This is *agapē*-love, self-giving, self-sacrificing love.

This type of love is without attachment; without self-interest; without anticipating a reward. It is unselfish interest in the welfare of others.⁴

b. What does it mean to pray for one's enemies?

Presumably it means more than asking God to change their behavior or attitudes. I believe praying for one's enemies—either verbal or nonverbal prayer—involves a serious attempt to see them from God's perspective.

About one year ago (Oct 3, 2006), a deranged man armed with three guns and ammunition entered an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. He barricaded the door and then opened fire on a dozen girls. He murdered three girls and two more died in the hospital. He committed suicide.⁵

When the peaceful, close-knit Amish community grieved over the unspeakable losses, they invited the family of the killer to mourn with them. At the funeral, they prayed for their children and they prayed for the killer as well.

The Amish leader said, "We have no enemies; we are all God's children, and forgiveness is at the very core of our Christian faith."

Jesus prayed for his enemies. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, he prayed that God would forgive those who crucified him.

To pray for one's enemy is a both gift and an opportunity. It is an opportunity to grow beyond our own narrow, ego centered existence. This is *kenosis*, self-emptying, just as Jesus emptied himself (Phil 2:5-8).

– When we empty ourselves and pray for our enemy, we have the opportunity to grow in Christ Consciousness, which is an awareness of

³ Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 100.

⁴ This is very similar to the Buddhist idea of love or *metta*. See "Metta: The Philosophy and Practice of Universal Love" at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/buddharakkhita/wheel365.html>.

⁵ See "5th girl dies after Amish schoolhouse shooting"; <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15105305/>.

God's purposes and interests that go far beyond our own self-centered lives.

- When we empty ourselves and pray for our enemy, we transcend ourselves and see from above. This moves us closer to God. And when we are close to God, we see that we—both ourselves and our enemies—have the same Creator, the same Source of Life, and are connected in the same web of existence.⁶
- When we empty ourselves and pray for an enemy, we discover that God is able to love those who hate and abuse us God and, more significantly, God loves us despite our disobedience, bad attitudes, and shortcomings. We discover we are accepted by God

c. Questions

- Do you have any enemies?⁷
- Has anyone attacked you in the last six months for so?
- Can you name the people who have hurt you in some way—such as your reputation, your work, or your well-being?
- Have some people misrepresented what you have said? Distorted your views? Thwarted the advancement of your career? Punished you unjustly? Discriminated against you because of your race or gender?
- Has someone said bad things about you? Has a teacher taken a dislike to you or graded you harshly or unfairly?

We often carrying hard feelings toward our enemies in our hearts, and that wear us out. We often carry the voices of our enemies in our heads, and that steals our joy, poisons our souls, and ruins our relationships.

It is better to listen to Jesus: Pray for your these enemies. Tell God how you feel. Love your enemies; do an act of kindness for them. This will help you break free from negative feelings and negative self-talk; it may lead to making your enemy a friend; and it will help you develop Christ Consciousness.

d. Protest

But, I can hear the protest from you. If we love our enemies, and treat them well, won't they continue being horrible? Won't they continue being harsh or unjust? In addition, doesn't the imperative to love enemies encourage victims of violence to be passive, especially women in situations of abuse or people groups under an occupation force?

My response is we should remember that Jesus embodied the injunction to love enemies, but that in no way stopped him from denouncing injustice.

3. Purpose: To be children of God (45a)

⁶ Jesus prayed that his followers would be one, even as he and the Father were one (Jn 17:26). His prayer for oneness and unity for all believers is the horizon for our prayers for our enemies.

⁷ Some of the following questions are from William W. Klein, *Become What You Are: Spiritual Formation According to the Sermon on the Mount* (Tyronne, GA: Authentic, 2006) 130-31.

Why should we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? We've discussed a few reasons already, but Jesus' answers the question directly in verses 45-47.

a. Explanation: Because God loves without limits (45b-c)

5:45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Simply put, when we love our enemies, we show we belong to God whose love is without limits. Every day, God loves friends and enemies alike, proven by the fact that the *sun shines* and *rain falls* equally on the fields of the wicked and godly. God's generosity is impartial.

If we are children of God, we will imitate God. We will not put boundaries on our love. We will love neighbors and enemies alike just like God. This recalls the beatitude in Matt 5:9: Peacemakers—those who love without limit—will be called children of God.

So, why should we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? Because we are God's children. We want to imitate God, who loves without limits.

Jesus offers a second explanation.

b. Explanation: Because limited love is not of God (46-47)

5:46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 5:47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the *Gentiles* do the same?

Jesus offers two analogies. Both make the same point. If we claim to have God's love, we can have no ulterior motives. God has no hidden motives when s/he loves the wicked and the righteous.

Your Creator doesn't ask anything from you in exchange for giving you life—it was free and abundant, and no one is excluded. If we do an act of love expecting something in return, then we're not representing God, because God expects nothing in return for his love.

When we love without limitations, without conditions, we imitate God, develop Christ Consciousness, and become instruments of God in this world.

4. Injunction: Be complete (*teleios*) like God (48)

Finally, the NRSV ends chapter 5 with the injunction:

5:48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is about imitating God. The word for “perfect” is *teleios*, which I translate as “complete”. *Teleios* means to *be complete* or *mature*.

So this last injunction is about “God’s completeness in including the evil and the good, the unrighteous and the righteous, in God’s love. God is complete and all-inclusive, giving sunshine and rain to all, even enemies.”⁸

It is not about God being perfect in the sense of some abstract ideal about flawless perfection. It is about God’s complete love.

In fact, Luke 6:36 gives the same teaching as Matt 5:48, but instead of saying, “be complete,” it says, “Be merciful as you Father is merciful.”

Put together, Jesus is saying that we should be complete in our love, we should love without limit, without boundaries, without expecting anything in return. That is to be merciful as God is merciful (Lk 6:36).

C. Love in Action

Jesus continues to talk about righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees.

Matt 6:1-4. Beware of practicing your piety [righteousness] before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (NRSV)

Jesus picks up the same theme about having ulterior motives for doing acts of piety. If you love expecting a reward, it is not divine love. If you give expecting a reward, it is not divine generosity.

Jesus is not calling almsgiving or generosity into question, only its misuse for self-glorification.

1. The wrong way to be generous

Blow a trumpet, which means calling attention to oneself as the “hypocrites” (actors), who pretend to be something they are not.

2. The right way to be generous

Not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing, which probably means not to think too highly of one’s own generosity⁹ or to practice charity as quietly and unobtrusively as possible—“in secret” (v. 4).¹⁰

⁸ Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2006) 105.

⁹ So Dale Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 110.

¹⁰ Richard Gardner, *Matthew*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1991) 116.

D. Reflections

Today we addressed three themes that are woven together like three strands of a rope: love, being children of God, and imitation of God.

If we are to be children of God, we imitate God our divine Parent. As 1 Jn 4:7-8 says, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does to know God, for God is love.”