

As we come to the end of Matthew, chapter five, I want to restate something I said in an earlier sermon in this series. As we allow Jesus to speak to us in this chapter, we need to remember that our Lord is not addressing these words to people in general. These are not words to people on the street, those who gather at Yuk Yuks or a downtown bar. Everything Jesus says in this chapter is intended for those who are already Christians. For those who are disciples of Jesus, and children of our Father in Heaven.

This word disciple is one I want to pause over for a minute. It is part of a series of words that mean "to learn", "to examine", "to consider", "to become a pupil" When Jesus taught he wasn't just attempting to impart information to people. Rather he wanted to awaken within people commitment to himself as they examined and considered what he was saying. Disciples are people who are being taught by Jesus and in turn learning to discipline their lives so that they are showing by their actions that they are committed to Jesus.

It is as we choose to follow Jesus that he imparts to us His Holy Spirit. As you read through this chapter, it is clear that apart from the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives it is impossible for us to receive these words, let alone live them out.

This is particularly the case as we approach what Jesus says in verses 38-48. These ten verses have been the cause of much confusion and misunderstanding. Therefore we are going to take two weeks to consider this passage. This week I want us to think about them in a more general sense and then in two weeks we will look at the more specific meaning of Jesus' teaching here at the end of chapter five.

I want to begin by referring back to what Jesus says in verse 20. This is the verse that introduces the series of sayings that follow the formula "You have heard it said... but I say to you". At verse 20 Jesus says, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven,"

He means by this, "There is a way of life -- there is an authentic, deep, unhypocritical way of life -- that those who are my disciples are called to live. Disciples are called to live this way not to affect their relationship with God, but to reflect the relationship they do have." Let me unpack this a little bit.

Many people think that we have to live a certain way in order to be accepted by God. But such a view runs counter to everything Jesus taught about God's love being a gift that we cannot earn. We can only receive it. Paul said as much in Ephesians 2 when he wrote:

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Here is one of the clearest statements of what it means to be a Christian. We receive God's love as a gift, but once we have received this gift, our lives are to reflect the relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ. This is why Paul goes on to say that in Christ Jesus we have been created for good works. Here in the Sermon on the Mount we have Jesus' most extensive teaching on what these good works are

When we come to Jesus, trusting in him, receiving the power of the kingdom, we are cleansed on the inside by the forgiveness and love of God that Jesus' offers. Then we can bank our hope on all his promises, and let his ransoming death cover all our failures and imperfections. Then we will be able to live the way Jesus' teaches here in the Sermon on the Mount, not perfectly, but powerfully, and our lives will be the light of the world that proves we are the children of God.

Let me use verses 44-45 to prove what I am saying. "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

Now someone might take this to mean that you must first become a person who loves his enemies *before* you can be a child of God. But it may also mean: love your enemies and so prove yourself to be what you are -- a child of God. That is, show you are a child of God by acting the way your Father acts. If you are his, then his character is in you, and you will be inclined to do what he does. God loves his enemies -- the evil and the unrighteous -- in sending rain and sunshine on them instead of instant judgment.

I think that is, in fact just what it means: love your enemies and so show that God is your Father. Why do I think that? Several reasons. Let me just give two from the Sermon on the Mount. One comes from Matthew 5:16,

*Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify **your Father** who is in heaven.*

Notice two things: one is that Jesus speaks to his disciples and calls God their Father. He does not say, "He may *become* your Father." He says, "He *is* your Father." Second, notice that when people see the good works of the disciples (like loving their enemies) they give glory to our Father. Why? Because our Father is in us helping us and enabling us to do the good works. If we did the good works on our own so that we could then become children of our Father, the world should see our good works and give us the glory. So Jesus not only says that God is already the Father of the disciples, but this is the very reason that they can do the loving works they do. The light that they let shine IS the light of their Father's love within them.

The other reason I think Jesus means that loving our enemies is not the cause but the evidence of our having God as our Father comes from Matthew 7:11-12.

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

So here again Jesus tells his disciples that God is their Father -- even though they are imperfect in their love (he calls them "evil") -- and that he stands more ready to give us the help we need than we are to give our own children help when they ask.

Then -- and this is the crucial point -- in verse 12 Jesus draws this conclusion from his teaching about the love of God's Fatherhood in verse 11:

Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

The word "therefore" is crucial here. It means that the golden rule is based on the loving, prayer-answering, Father-heart of God. God will answer your prayers and take care of you . . . THEREFORE, love others the way you want to be loved. And even more importantly, love others in the way your father loves. Jesus makes our love for others the result or fruit of God's fatherly love for us, not the payment we make to become his children.

So when Jesus says, back in Matthew 5:44, "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" he does not mean that loving our enemies earns us the right to be a child of God. You can't earn the status of a child. You can be born into it. You can be adopted into it. You can't work your way into it. Jesus means that loving our enemies shows that God has already become our Father, and that the only reason we are able to love our enemies is because he loves us and has met our needs first.

Another clue in the Sermon on the Mount that this is the way Jesus is thinking is found in Matthew 7:16-17,

You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

What Jesus is saying is that you cannot produce the fruit of love in order to become a good tree. You have to become a good tree in order to produce the fruit of love. Becoming a child of God and being transformed on the inside -- becoming a good tree -- precedes and enables love, not vice versa.

If you take the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, all the commandments assume -- they presuppose -- that a profound conversion has happened -- a new birth -- before our righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. We do not earn or merit our sonship or our entrance into heaven. We receive it as a free gift and gracious promise, and then we live in a way that shows where our treasure is and who

our Father is. Loving our enemies is a *proof* that the power of the kingdom has entered your life, not a *payment* for the power of the kingdom to enter your life.

The Sermon on the Mount and the command to love our enemies are not isolated ethical teachings. They rise up out of a great foundation of grace in the life and ministry of Jesus. Let me close by making sure we see the outlines of that foundation. This is where we get the power to love our enemies. This is how we become the children of God.

The very first word of the Sermon on the Mount -- and this is no mistake -- is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We don't enter the kingdom of heaven because of the moral resources that we bring; we enter by confessing with tears our poverty of spirit.

In Mark 10:15 Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not *receive* the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all." It is a gift to the poor in spirit who are broken and childlike and have no airs of self-sufficiency.

In Mark 2:17 Jesus said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." We enter the kingdom poor in spirit, helpless as a child, sick and in need of a spiritual physician.

This is what Jesus was doing when he ate with tax collectors and sinners -- he was pursuing the poor and the helpless and the sick. And the self-sufficient murmured, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). And when they said that, Jesus told them the parable of the prodigal son. And the point was: I don't eat with sinners because I like sin. I eat with sinners because I am the love of God welcoming home poor, helpless, diseased sinners -- forgiving them, cleansing them, making them new, and sending them out to love in the power of God.

Which is why he could say to the priests and elders in Matthew 21:31, "Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots are going into the kingdom of God before you."

How can this be: sinners and harlots going into the kingdom of God? The bottom line answer Jesus gave: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). He came to die for them -- for us.

The Sermon on the Mount and the command to love our enemies are not isolated ethical teachings. They grow up out of a great foundation of grace in the life and teaching of Jesus. This is where we get the power to love -- that he loved us while we were poor and diseased and helpless and enemies, and gave himself for us.

What does it mean to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give to those who ask. Who are our enemies? And what does loving them actually look like? That's what we will look at next week.