

# Loving as God's People

Matt 5:43-48

SS Lesson for 11/13/2011

**Devotional Scripture:** 1 John 4:7-21

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# Introduction

## Overview and Approach to Lesson

The outline of the lesson came from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator. The lesson teaches how we need to be **Loving as God's People**. The **study's aim** is to learn that love sets us apart as God's people. The **study's application** is to experience that when we love our enemies, we show that we are God's people.

## Lesson Introduction and Background

### From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

#### *Love in the Abstract and the Concrete*

A generation ago, Charles Schulz (1922-2000) ended one of his beloved Peanuts cartoons with a line that became famous: "I love mankind; it's people I can't stand." That remark became famous because it matches so well with our experience. Everyone, it seems, wants to live up to the ideal of loving other people. That's easy to do when we think of other people in the abstract. Lump all human beings together, and no one would say that it is good to be indifferent, uncaring, or hostile to them. We all want to love "mankind." But talk about individuals, and it is quite a different matter! We can find all kinds of reasons not to love specific people we know. Sometimes we find them annoying. Harder still to love are people who have done us harm, whether deliberately or accidentally. Then there are those who seem to be focused on their resentments toward us, who seem constantly to try to hurt us. Sadly, some of those people are close to us; they may even be family members. In today's passage, Jesus tackles this vital subject. In addressing it, he lays out some of his most challenging teaching on how we are to live. What he says seems unnatural to us, even impossible to carry out. But when we understand what God has done for us, we see that what Jesus says is our only possible response.

#### *Lesson Background*

Today's text is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is his great exposition of what it means to be a subject in God's kingdom. God's kingdom, or the kingdom of heaven as it is called in Matthew's Gospel, is the establishment of God's promised rule over the world. The world is in rebellion against God, as human beings express their desire to be free of God by disobeying him. Sin has made us God's enemies. But in God's kingdom, God reestablishes his reign over all. He overcomes sin and invites sinners—his enemies—to become his friends. Jesus' audience was very much looking forward to the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus' announcement that the kingdom was "near" (Matthew 4:17) had led a large crowd to follow him and listen to his teaching (5:1). But many in that crowd probably understood God's kingdom to be a political, military entity—like other kingdoms of which they knew. More particularly, Jesus' Jewish audience likely understood that when God's kingdom came, it would mean the end of their being ruled by pagan empires, like the Romans under whom Israel lived in Jesus' time. People anticipated that the coming of God's kingdom would mean that the enemies of his people, their pagan overlords, would be utterly defeated. After all, God had worked in the past through military leaders, had he not? But God was to establish his kingdom not with the sword, but with the cross. Those who are subjects of a kingdom established in this manner must live out God's grace as they deal with their own enemies.

### From the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

The world is starving for love. We see evidences of this everywhere. The rancor of partisan politics can be seen in negative campaign commercials, nasty Congressional debates, and angry demonstrations. Employers and labor unions are constantly at odds over wages and benefits, and extremist groups whip up hatred for minorities. On the international scene, nations strain diplomacy to its limits over ideology, territory, trading advantages, and military rivalry. Terrorists believe the highest goal in life is to kill their enemies. Kidnappers and slave traders prowl the world and victimize innocent and vulnerable women and children. Exploitation for economic gain or personal pleasure seems to determine how people deal with others. It is time to heed Jesus' call to an inclusive love, love that extends to all mankind. It is this kind of love that God exhibits continually and that Jesus displayed dramatically when He died for the sins of all. It is hard to love a boss who is rude to us every day. It is

difficult to show love for someone who shows us no love at all. Yet that is exactly what Jesus demands of us. Christianity does not offer us a life of ease. It calls us to follow what Jesus said; yet on our own we are not able to do what He requires of us. We need supernatural power that comes from the Holy Spirit. Jesus asks us to do the impossible so that we will rely on His strength to be the people of God He wants us to be.

## Major Theme Analysis

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

### **Love According to God's Expectations (Matt 5:43-45)**

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

45 that 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.

### **God's Expectation is to love our enemies (43-44)**

*Loving enemies has gotten lost in the translation (from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)*

Excitement mounted among personnel at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as the Mars Climate Orbiter approached the "red planet" in the fall of 1999. The excitement turned to dejection, however, when the orbiter flew too close to Mars and was destroyed. As the data were analyzed to discover what had gone wrong, the answer was found to be embarrassingly simple: the navigation team at Jet Propulsion Laboratories had used the metric system of millimeters and meters in its calculations, while the builders at Lockheed-Martin Astronautics had provided their data in the English system of feet and inches! Years of work by hundreds of people and an expenditure of 125 million dollars were lost because the data were "lost in translation" from one form of measurement to another—and no one caught the error. Far too often, Jesus' instructions about loving our enemies have been "lost in translation" from the pages of Scripture to the pages of our lives. This isn't a matter of spoken or written languages; it's the difference between the language of godliness and the language of this world.

*Love enemies because it is part of the conviction of God (Rom 12:20)*

On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

*We must have benevolent love so we can love our enemies (from Barnes' Notes)*

There are two kinds of love, involving the same general feeling, or springing from the same fountain of good-will to all mankind, but differing so far as to admit of separation in idea. The one is that feeling by which we approve of the conduct of another, commonly called the love of complacency; the other, that by which we wish well to the person of another, though we cannot approve his conduct. This is the love of benevolence, and this love we are to bear toward our enemies. It is impossible to love the conduct of a person who curses and reviles us, who injures our person or property, or who violates all the laws of God; but, though we may hate his conduct, and suffer keenly when WE are affected by it, yet we may still wish well to the PERSON; we may pity his madness and folly; we may speak kindly OF him and TO him; we may return good for evil; we may aid him in the time of trial; we may seek to do him good here and to promote his eternal welfare hereafter, (Rom. 12:17-20). This seems to be what is meant by loving our enemies; and this is a special law of Christianity, and the highest possible test of piety, and probably the most difficult of all duties to be performed.

*Love enemies because there is a reward for doing so (Luke 6:34-36)*

34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. 35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

*Love enemies because we are called to do so by God (1 Pet 3:9)*

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

*Love enemies because we are to forgive and love so as to be in unity with God (Col 3:13-14)*

13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

### **God's Expectation is to follow His example (45)**

*Follow God's example of how to love enough to give life (John 15:12-14)*

12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command.

*Follow God's example of being willing to die for God's work (Phil 2:28-30)*

28 Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. 29 Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, 30 because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

*Follow God's example of walking as Jesus did (1 John 2:5-6)*

5 But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: 6 Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

*Follow God's example of being willing to deny self and lose life (Mark 8:34-35)*

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

*Follow God's example of being willing to die for those who are not righteous (Rom 5:7-8)*

7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

*Follow God's example of forgiveness (Ps 86:5)*

5 You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.

*Follow God's example of giving encouragement and hope (2 Thess 2:16)*

16 May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,

## **Love According to a Higher Law (Matt 5:46-48)**

46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?  
47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?  
48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

### **Higher law of loving without expectations (46-47)**

*Without expectations because God will reward greatly (Luke 6:32-36)*

32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. 35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

*Without expectations because suffering or loving unconditionally is commendable before God (1 Peter 2:20-21)*

20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. 21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

*Without expectations because it is a blessing (Luke 14:12-14)*

12 Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

*Without expectations to receive a reward from God (Matt 6:2-4)*

2 "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

*Without expectations to be a good neighbor (Luke 10:33-35)*

33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He 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. 35 The 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.'

### **Higher law of being perfect (48)**

*Meaning of Perfect (from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)*

The Greek New Testament has several words that are translated into English as "perfect." The word that is used here also means "complete" or "mature." In what ways can we be as complete as our Father in heaven? We can in no way match His omnipotent power, obviously, or His unlimited knowledge and wisdom. But this text is talking about loving our enemies (v. 44). We can and ought to love all those whom God loves, and we ought to do good to them as we have opportunity

(Galatians 6:10). Instead of trying to excuse our imperfections, let's try to improve our loving and helping.

*To be perfect is to be complete (from Barnes' Notes)*

This word commonly means "finished, complete, pure, holy." Originally, it is applied to a piece of mechanism, as a machine that is complete in its parts. Applied to people, it refers to completeness of parts, or perfection, where no part is defective or wanting. Thus, Job (Job 1:1) is said to be "perfect;" that is, not holy as God, or "sinless"-- for fault is afterward found with him (Job 9:20; 42:6); but his piety was "proportionate"-- had a completeness of parts was consistent and regular.

*To be perfect is to be mature in love (from Wycliffe Commentary)*

Be ye therefore perfect is to be restricted to the matter of love in this context. As God's love is complete, not omitting any group, so must the child of God strive for maturity in this regard (cf. Eph 5:1-2). This cannot mean sinlessness, for (Mt 5:6-7) shows that the blessed ones still hunger for righteousness and need mercy.

*Be perfect by purification of those things that contaminate the body and spirit (2 Cor 7:1)*

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

*Be perfect through unity and peacefulness (2 Cor 13:11)*

Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

*Be perfect by being like God through the Holy Spirit (1 Pet 1:15-16)*

15 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

*Commentary from Barnes' Notes*

The foundation of the command is, that they professed to be his people, and that as his people they ought to be like their God. Compare (Mic. 4:5). It is a great truth, that people everywhere will imitate the God whom they worship.

*I am made perfect in Jesus (Col 1:27-28)*

27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

*It is God's plan for me to be made perfect (Heb 11:40)*

God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

*Be perfect through perseverance finishing its work (James 1:4)*

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

*What Do You Think - Matt 5:48 (from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)*

Since none of us is perfect, how can we keep from being discouraged by Jesus' command to be perfect?

*Points for Your Meditation*

- The role of grace (Romans 3:23, 24)
- The role of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26)
- The danger of perfectionism

## Conclusion and Other Thoughts

### ***Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary***

Someone once made the observation that we all find it easy to love a certain kind of person—the YAVIS person: “Young, Attractive, Verbal, Intelligent, and Sophisticated.” Who would not love someone like that? But the truth is that most of us are HOUNDS: Homely, Old, Unsophisticated, Nonverbal, and Dumb! We are all hard to love. But God, who knows better than anyone how unlovable we are, has loved us. His love transforms us to learn to love others in the same way, even those who have hurt us most deeply.

### ***Concluding Thoughts from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator***

In Matt 5:44, Jesus commanded us to exhibit the most difficult kind of love: love for those who hate us. Jesus' words here end a series of statements that follow the same rhetorical pattern. Many begin with the words "Ye have heard that it was said," after which Jesus cited a well-known moral principle, usually drawn from Scripture. Then He added, "But I say unto you" and demanded that His disciples conform to an even more difficult standard. The golden text is part of Jesus' sixth and final use of this pattern. Jesus' words "but I say unto you" are a bold declaration of divine authority. In many ways, Jesus was presenting Himself as a new prophet like Moses, giving a new law on a new mountain. But unlike Moses, Jesus was not a mere messenger bringing the words of God to the people. He spoke as God Himself. The listeners took note of this, for when Jesus finished His sermon, "the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matt. 7:28-29). "Thou shalt love thy neighbour" (Matt. 5:43) comes directly from the Old Testament (cf. Lev. 19:18). However, the words "and hate thine enemy" are nowhere found. In quoting these words of the Jewish rabbis, Jesus was pointing out a common misinterpretation of the commandment. Since the command is to love one's neighbor, one could avoid moral responsibility by limiting the definition of the word "neighbor." We see evidence that some tried to interpret the commandment this way in Luke 10. There, a teacher of the law asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbour?" (vs. 29). Luke tells us that he was trying to justify his own actions, presumably by limiting the application of the commandment. Both in Luke 10 and in our text, Jesus completely rejected any attempt to limit the applicability of the commandment. Not only are we to love our friends and neighbors, but we are also to love our enemies. Even while our enemies are cursing us and abusing us, we are to bless them and pray for them. The Old Testament also gives us indications that we are to love our enemies. Israelite law required that one return a lost animal to its owner, even if the owner was an enemy (Exod. 23:4). Jesus' words here are even clearer and more direct, however. By loving our enemies, we imitate God (Matt. 5:45). God shows His love for all by providing all with rain and sunshine. In the same way, our love should show no favoritism. Jesus never asks us to do what He has not already done. Even in the midst of the agony of the cross, He exerted Himself to pray for those who were crucifying Him, saying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Having already been made right with God through the death of Christ, who loved His enemies completely, we too can love our enemies. In the book of Acts, Stephen offered an example of what it looks like to love one's enemies. Just as Jesus forgave in His death, so Stephen as he was being stoned prayed, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60).

### ***Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator***

1. Your enemies need your prayers as much as anyone else (Matt. 5:43-44)
2. We do not do good to evildoers for the purpose of making them feel guilty. We do it to be like our Father (vs. 45)
3. In this life, God blesses both the good and the evil
4. Christian love should be compellingly different from the world's love (vs. 46-47)
5. If the world's standards are the same as yours, perhaps yours are too low
6. The perfection God demands of us, He will also accomplish in us (vs. 48)

## ***Heart of the Lesson from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator***

Love is a distinguishing attribute of Christ's followers (John 13:35). We are to be characterized by our love for one another. Perhaps even more amazing, though, is that believers are to love those who hate them. This is certainly a challenge, but it is also a command Jesus gave. Nothing sets us apart as believers more, and perhaps nothing makes a greater impact than genuine love for those who despise and mistreat us.

### **Our obligation for loving our enemies (Matt. 5:43-44)**

Jesus reminded His disciples of the Old Testament command to love one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18). But He also reminded them of a popular addition they also had heard: "Hate thine enemy" (Matt. 5:43). This "corollary" seemed to be assumed by most, including the scribes and Pharisees, who thought that one's enemies deserve nothing but hatred. This idea, however, was not biblical and certainly did not reflect the mind of God. In fact, Jesus extended the command to love one's neighbor to showing love for one's enemies. Specifically, Jesus had in mind those who persecute His followers. Instead of our hatred, we are to give them our love and pray for them. Our prayers reach up to God, and our love is extended to them in tangible ways. This, of course, is not a natural response toward those who treat us hatefully. God does not expect us to suddenly start feeling kindly toward them, but He does expect us to act in loving ways toward them and to express our love for them through our prayer as well. This does not mean we will be devoid of all feelings. In fact, when we start doing loving things, loving emotions soon take root, and we find it a joy to love our enemies.

### **Our model for loving our enemies (Matt. 5:45-48)**

When we show love for our enemies, we demonstrate that we are true children of God. This is because God Himself loves His enemies. He gives the needed sunshine and rain to wicked people as well as to His own children. Both good and evil benefit from His blessings. Indeed, Romans 5:8 tells us that the greatness of God's love was shown to us by His sending Jesus to die for us when we were sinners and enemies of God. God Himself is our model for how we are to treat those who mistreat us. Jesus said that if we love only those who love us, we are no different from the despised tax collectors, or "publicans" (Matt. 5:46), who, like all sinners, can muster up love and good works on behalf of those who show love to them. There is nothing special about this. Only those who show genuine love for their enemies and persecutors are following the example of God. This is why Jesus told His disciples to be "perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). It may be that "perfect" here means mature or complete, as it often does in the Bible—in which case it would be calling Jesus' followers to love fully and completely all people and groups. However, it may also be calling believers to seek the absolute perfection of the Father. This is unattainable in this life, but it is the goal toward which every believer should be progressing.