

You Said, But I Say – The Finale

“You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies.’” – Matthew 5:43-44

In “Foxe's Book of Martyrs” the author recounts the story of the Scottish Reformer George Wishart, a contemporary and friend of John Knox, who was sentenced to die as a heretic. Because the executioner knew of Wishart's selfless ministering to hundreds of people who were dying of the plague, he hesitated carrying out the sentence. When Wishart saw the expression of remorse on the executioner's face, he went over and kissed him on the cheek, saying, “Sir, may that be a token that I forgive you.”

Again, Jesus continues to refute the errors of the scribes and Pharisees. In verses 38-42 He deals with matters of the Law and retaliation, and the negative side of what His followers must NOT do when provoked by personal and private offenses and injuries. Here, He reveals the positive side of what His followers MUST do to those who hate and persecute them. He exposes further the perversion of the Divine standard, indicating again the holiness required of His subjects based on verse 20: “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” In his classic commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, A.W. Pink states, “They had systematically distorted each precept that concerned man's relations with his fellows – lowering the Divine standard and narrowing its scope. . . Count after count the Savior had preferred against them: over against which He had set the elevated and (non-negotiable) spirituality of God's requirements. The contrast is radical and revolutionary; it is the contrast between error and truth, darkness and light, corruption and holiness.”

“You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.” Even though the scribes and Pharisees were supposedly the supreme students and interpreters of the Law, they were guilty in this case of double perversion. First, they omitted the remainder of the phrase from Leviticus 19:18, “But you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In their proud self-righteous attitude, it was impossible for them to care for anyone more than themselves: “The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer’” (Lu. 18:11). Apparently, their “neighbor” must have only included persons of their own preference – essentially their own kind.

Secondly, they added the phrase “and hate your enemy”, consistent with their self-love and interest. The words “and hate your enemy” were called a “parasitical growth” by C.H. Spurgeon. One can search in vain for any Old Testament teaching that allowed for personal hatred, making this an obvious rabbinical invention. Conversely, the Old Testament contains numerous instructions in this regard: “You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart. . . You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:17). “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (Prov. 25:21). “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself” (Lev. 19:34).

One could object, for example, to David's words in Psalm 139, “Do I not hate those who hate Thee, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against Thee? I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies” (Ps. 139:21-22). The difference to be understood is a contrast of personal versus public enemies. David is not referring to someone who has injured him personally, but to those who are openly revolting against God and harming His people. David testifies that he hates the evil cause, not a person. Twice in Psalm 119, the Psalmist remarks, “I hate every false way” (v. 104, 128). Love for truth and hatred of falsehood should be the mark of every true Christian. David was not expressing a personal vendetta, but a concern for God's justice and holiness to be executed toward those who despised God's name and persecuted God's people. It is a hatred of God's enemies, not our own enemies – and only God ultimately knows who His enemies are. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments, “The difficulty with the Pharisees and scribes was that they did not draw that (personal and private) distinction. They took this judicial principle and put it into operation in their ordinary affairs and in their daily lives. They regarded this as a justification, on their own part, for hating their enemies, hating anybody they disliked, or anybody who was offensive to them.”

“But I say to you, love your enemies.” Elsewhere, “Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which

despitefully use you" (Lu. 6:28). Love is action; benevolent actions for cruel ones. In the parable of the Good Samaritan the question is, "Who is my neighbor"? The answer is anyone who needs our help (Lu. 10:37). The "love" spoken of here is "agapao" {ag-ap-ah'-o}, the love that seeks and works to meet another's highest welfare. It is a love of not just emotion and sentiment, but of action – best described by what it does through practical, humble and sacrificial service.

Following Jesus' washing of the disciples feet, He said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (Jn. 13:34). The question is not who to love, but how to love in the most helpful way. Someone once put it this way: "Love in action is much more terrible than love in dreams." It is not vague, but reveals and demonstrates by proof: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us . . . while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:8,10). We are not to be enemies of those who may be enemies to us. Only from their perspective, we may be their enemies; from our perspective, they should be our neighbors. This is the greatest example.

In 1567 King Philip the second of Spain appointed the Duke of Alba as governor of the lower part of the nation. The Duke was a bitter enemy of the newly-emerging Protestant Reformation. His rule was called the reign of terror, and his council was called the Blood Council, because it had ordered the slaughter of so many Protestants. It is reported that one man who was sentenced to die for his biblical faith managed to escape during the dead of winter. As he was being pursued by a lone soldier, the man came to a lake whose ice was thin and cracking. Somehow he managed to get safely across the ice, but as soon as he reached the other side he heard his pursuer screaming. The soldier had fallen through the ice and was about to drown. At the risk of being captured, tortured and eventually killed, the man went back across the lake and rescued his enemy, because the love of Christ constrained him to do it. He knew he had no other choice if he was to be faithful to his Lord.

The love that God demands of His people is a love so great that it even embraces enemies.

– Article submitted by Chuck Wetzel
07.19.20