

THE HEART OF GOD

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 5:43–48
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I remember so clearly my first day of college. I had the opportunity to attend Stanford University, which is how I ended up at PBC 25 years ago. I can still picture pulling up to my freshman dorm for the first time. There was a table outside with upperclassmen sitting at it. They recognized me from the pictures I had sent in and as soon as they saw me, a voice bellowed from the loudspeaker, “Welcome Paul Taylor!”

All I had done was show up. Just like that, I was a part of something. These people welcomed me. I was one of them.

Later during orientation week, they gathered all the freshmen into an auditorium, and they taught us one of the most important aspects of being a Stanford student. Upperclassmen gathered on stage and said the words “UC Berkeley.” Then they hissed. This was how we had to respond whenever we heard those words. They would test us throughout those first few days. It became an automatic response. When we heard “Berkeley,” we hissed.

All those people had done was to show up at a different school. But they were our rivals. They were not one of us.

Humans are, by nature, tribal. We like to band together into groups. If you’re a part of a group, you are included and welcomed. If you’re on the outside, you are feared and questioned.

What I experienced as a freshman at Stanford happens in hundreds of ways all over the world. We are taught—sometimes explicitly like during college orientation and sometimes implicitly by comments and assumptions—who is in and who is out. We are taught who to love and who not to love.

It is into this basic human tendency that Jesus’ most radical command lands like a bomb.

If you’re new to our church, it might help to know we’re in the middle of a series called “Blessed Are.” Since

late August, we’ve been looking at the Sermon on the Mount. In this message, Jesus speaks to a group of Jewish peasants to help them understand what the good life looks like. What does it mean being blessed?

For the last six weeks, we’ve been looking at a series of similar statements that Jesus makes. In each of them, he starts with a well-known law and seems to modify it to make it harder. But we’ve observed that in each case, what he’s doing is trying to get at our hearts. Jesus is showing us illustrations of the ways that we would behave if we were living immersed in his kingdom.

After working through five different topics of anger, lust, sex, truth and revenge, he arrives at the core issue that lies behind all of these. Now he addresses love.

And as we hear these words, we will see that Jesus isn’t just getting to our hearts. He is showing us what lies deep in the heart of God. We receive an invitation to live as God lives. Our hearts can mimic the heart of God.

When you first read these words, they barely make sense. It seems utterly impossible to imagine living this way. Almost no other ethical or religious framework suggests this kind of attitude. Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist, had this to say, “The Christian principle, ‘Love your enemies’ is good ... There is nothing to be said against it except that it is too difficult for most of us to practice sincerely.”

But as we look at these words, we’re going to discover something powerful. Not only are they possible, but they are a description of the kind of freedom that we long for. We want to live this way. We just find it incredibly difficult.

How can Jesus say “Love your enemies”? How can I love people who have hurt me deeply? It would be easier to tear out my eye and throw it away. How can we live by those words?

Let’s look in-depth at what Jesus says and see if we can allow his words to change us. We’ll start by looking at the old law that he references. We’ll see why that law

makes so much sense to us. But then we'll look at this new command he gives us and try to figure out what he means by it. We'll conclude by asking what our next step is along the road of faith to living in the kingdom of the heavens.

Love your neighbor

Jesus starts out quoting one of the most well-known ideas in the Judeo-Christian world: Love your neighbor.

Matthew 5:43:

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

As Christians, this is one of our favorite laws to quote, at least the first part. We are supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves. But Jesus does something funny with this law.

He quotes two sides: love your neighbor and hate your enemy. Now, the Old Testament never explicitly says to hate your enemy. That wasn't part of the original law. But there were passages which seemed to point in that direction. And most people, at least in their minds, filled in the blank.

It makes sense. Love your neighbor. It's half of a law. “Love your neighbor” is restrictive. You're supposed to love this category of people. So there must be a different category of people I don't have to love.

I was taught this law during freshman orientation at college. Everyone here is my neighbor. I'm supposed to love them and feel connected to them. But that other group are my enemies. I should view them with scorn and condescension and wish to see them destroyed. But all in the form of a friendly school rivalry.

Everyone, everywhere in every time across the world and throughout history has been taught these lessons. Who is in my group, and how do I show my love for them? And who is outside my group and how do I express my rivalry toward them?

We tend to think about our identity in terms of the groups that we're a part of.

I travelled to Kenya several years ago. And while we there, I met another American. Instantly I felt connected to this person who was from my country because I am an American.

But then I came back home, and I'm surrounded by Americans. But when I go to Texas and meet someone from California, I'm thrilled because I am a Californian.

I come back to California, and I'm at a coffee shop, and I meet another Christian. They're kind of a rare breed around here. So I'm excited because I'm a Christian.

Then we get to talking, and I find out that they go to a non-denominational church. Even better! Because I am non-denominational.

Back here at my church, in my small group, I find out that someone else likes the ESV version. I'm thrilled because I am an “ESV reader.”

I have these concentric circles which define who I am. These are my tribes: American, Californian, Christian, Non-denominational. Of course, there is more: Forty Niners football fan, android user, ice cream aficionado, movie buff, etc.

This idea of tribes is the way most of us think. We're always thinking of who is in my tribe and outside of my tribe. And it changes depending on where I am and who I'm with. But the one constant is what lies at the center. At the end of the day, the only tribe that matters: me.

You're in my tribe if you're like me. If you're not, you're on the outside. This is how everyone works. We love people within our tribe because it's basically like loving yourself. The whole system works if you are like me. When you are different from me, that's when things break down.

Everyone works this way. Even the people who are outside of your circles have their own circles with them at the center. Jesus picks out two categories of people to make this point. Listen to what Jesus says:

Matthew 5:46-47:

“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

When these poor Jewish fishermen and farmers heard about Gentiles, they would have immediately thought of the Romans who occupied their land. They broke their food laws, stole their money, and terrorized their villages. Clearly, they were the enemy.

But even worse than the Roman Gentiles were the tax collectors. These were Jews who had turned against their own people. They saw a quick dollar to be made, so they sided with the Romans. They worked for them, and they collected the extravagant Roman taxes from their own people. The tax collectors were opportunistic traitors.

The tax collectors and the Gentiles: two categories of apparent enemies. The oppressors and the traitors. But Jesus points out that even these people take care of others within their own tribes.

So let's turn this on ourselves. Think about your own circles. Who are you? Who is it natural for you to love? And here's the critical question: who is outside your tribe?

That's the person Jesus is talking about when he talks about your enemy. In the first century, the answer would have been obvious: the enemy of the Jews were the Romans and everyone who conspired with them.

For us, anyone can be our enemy. Anyone who is outside our circle. Or anyone who stands in our way. They can be similar to me. But if they challenge me or irritate me or hurt me, all of a sudden they are on the outside. I am in the middle. The system works when others are on my side.

Something interesting can happen over time. My tribal identity can get smaller and smaller. I identify with fewer and fewer kinds of people, especially during times of significant change. And especially as the world around me changes. Those circles start to shrink. I have fewer neighbors and more enemies.

You may not think of yourself as having enemies, but I'm sure each of us can come with a list of people who fall outside our circles. Keep those people in mind. Let's take a look at the impossible suggestion Jesus makes.

Love your enemy

In this last of his six antitheses, Jesus challenges the basic approach that all of us have toward tribes. He's rewriting the rules of how we treat people.

Matthew 5:44-45:

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is 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.”

Remember that the Jews thought of themselves as God's chosen people. Remember how critical their identity was to them. Remember how brutally they've been treated by the Romans and the tax collectors. But here Jesus suggests a radical change to our whole outlook on the world. He's saying that when you live in the kingdom of the heavens, everything works differently.

He explains this by using God as a reference. He says that this is what God does. God has enemies — Jesus calls them the evil and the unjust. But God doesn't withhold basic blessings from these people. There's a fundamental attitude of love that God offers to his entire creation.

This is a helpful example because it shows us what Jesus means by loving your enemy. The way that God treats people is the model for how we love. The sun and rain are basic necessities for life. They form the major rhythm of what it means to be human.

The first topic Jesus dealt with in this section was anger. We saw how Jesus followed anger into our hearts and found contempt. Our temptation is to think of people as less than us. Eventually, we strip them of their humanity. As we've looked at all these areas---anger, lust, sex, truth, and revenge, we can see that contempt lies behind all of that. We're tempted to view others as less than human in 100 different ways.

So what Jesus is getting at here is treating others—even our enemies—as fully human. Recognize that they are whole people. Love them and pray for them—even those people who are outside our tribes. Even people like the Romans who you can never imagine feeling anything positive for at all. Even people who are within your tribe but have betrayed you. Even people like the tax collectors—Jews who have turned on their own people.

Jesus invites us to love those people who are different from us. Outside of our circles. This concept is entirely foreign to how the system operates. But this is the invitation: love the oppressors, love the traitors, love the outsiders.

The idea of loving those who are different from us would become the central ethic of Jesus' followers. This is what made them different. Everyone loved their own. The love within any community is powerful. But the followers of Jesus did something different. They didn't fight back when oppressed. They turned the other cheek.

These early Christians rescued babies to whom they had no obligation. They loved the people on the fringe of society who everyone else ignored. They sacrificed themselves for the Romans even as they were being killed. Just as Jesus spoke from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” They lived their lives in that manner. No one was outside of the bounds of their love.

Jesus’ words are incredibly helpful because they acknowledge that we will have enemies. People will stand in our way. People in power over us may oppress us, and people close to us may betray us. Relationships are complicated and complex.

My wife and I have gone through several difficult seasons in our marriage. We’ve found intimacy to be something we need to work hard at. It’s been worth it—an incredible prize—but it’s taken a lot of growth. And I’m sure that will continue.

I remember one time in marriage counseling when our counselor asked me how I felt about Rachel. I don’t remember the issue or the dynamic we were discussing, but I eventually said that it felt as if she was my enemy. That’s the kind of thing that Christian counselors live for. It’s like I pitched him a softball. So he swung hard and said, “What did Jesus say about how we can treat our enemies?”

The helpful thing about that process was that I could acknowledge the pain I was feeling. I could own the conflict in our relationship. I could be honest that it felt like we were enemies. I didn’t have to pretend like everything was fine. But even in that pain, I was invited to ask the question, “What does love look like here?”

This is what Jesus is getting at here. But remember— all along we’ve been saying that Jesus is trying to get at our hearts. He’s not giving us a law to follow: love your enemies. He’s painting a picture of what happens to people’s hearts when they live in the kingdom of the heavens.

So the real question is, how do you become the kind of person who can love someone even after they hurt you? Remember that we’re not talking about becoming a doormat. Jesus is not suggesting that we allow people to abuse us. All you have to do is look at Jesus’ life to see that isn’t what he means.

The question is how our hearts can be transformed in such a way that we can want what’s best for someone even when they are our enemy? For that to happen,

the whole system has to change. We can’t live within the system where we are at the center of concentric circles. We have to find a new way to live. And that’s how Jesus concludes this section.

Be perfect

Again, Jesus’ statement at first sounds impossible. It sounds like an absolutely unreachable goal.

Matthew 5:48:

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

This statement is not only a summary of the command to love your enemies. This is a summary of all that Jesus has been saying in these six statements contrasting the old law with life in the kingdom. Jesus began this section saying, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of God.”

We’ve been saying all along that Jesus doesn’t mean we have to have more righteousness than the scribes and Pharisees. He means our righteousness needs to be of a different kind. And now we have a fuller picture of what that kind is.

We’re supposed to be like God, not like the Pharisees. That’s a relief because I know people like the Pharisees. I know Christians like the Pharisees. And I don’t want to be like them. But I do want to be like Jesus. His life is worth emulating.

The word used here for “perfect” is “*teleioi*”—a Greek word having to do with fulfillment or completion of purpose. It has to do with being mature rather than immature. Of reaching the goal for which you were created. Of achieving your destiny and fulfilling your purpose.

It’s from the same root as the word Jesus said from the cross when he cried out, “*Tetelestai!*” It is finished. God’s purposes have been accomplished.

So God doesn’t want us to play the same game that the Pharisees play but to be better at it. He wants us to live life in a completely different way. God wants us to be like he is. He’s giving us a new system to live in.

This new system is the transformation that happens when you live in the kingdom of the heavens. You

become a different kind of person. You become who you were always meant to be. You become complete.

Remember the diagram about how we view the world? At the center of that diagram was ourselves. Everyone else was judged by me. But this new way of seeing the world has God at the center. He is the model for life. He is at the center of all my relationships.

Think about the fact that God himself is a Trinity. Theologians describe God by saying that he is three persons in one essence. Now think about what happens whenever there are three people in a room. If I'm alone, things are fine. If there's one other person, we can relate one on one. But as soon as there are three people in a room, there are tribes. One person agrees with another and someone else is left on the outside. It only takes three people to form tribes.

But God himself is three people. And there are no tribes. There is only perfect love and cooperation and delight. It's something we can't even imagine.

But this forms the basis of God's kingdom. The kingdom of the Heavens is the kingdom centered around God. A different kind of love than what we normally experience.

Within that kingdom are all sorts of people. Some are similar. Some are different. Some are Jews. Some are Pharisees. Some are tax collectors. Some are Romans.

And then there's you. Just another person in the kingdom of the heavens.

You're not at the center of identity circles that form who you are. You're part of the kingdom that God has formed. You're being transformed to be like Him. The path you're on is one of becoming like God. The old system worked when others were like me. I was at the center.

This system works when I am like God. When I become like God, I am living well in the kingdom of the heavens and I experience the life for which I was created. That's the secret. This is discipleship. As we follow Jesus here in Silicon Valley, our whole goal is to become like God.

But we have such a hard time imagining this. When we think of being like God, our temptation is to think about how hard it would be to act like God. We're thinking of being ourselves but acting like God. And

that's impossible! If we're imperfect—if we aren't yet fulfilled into what God wants us to be—then there's no way we can be perfect.

An apple tree cannot produce peaches no matter how hard it tries.

But if we are changed from within. If we become like God. If we become his children. Then our lives will be perfect because we'll be perfect from the inside.

If God changes us into peach trees, we'll have no trouble producing peaches. That's simply what peach trees do.

When we become like God, we live in the kingdom of the heavens. And we love our enemies because that is what God does. There are no tribes in the kingdom of the heavens. There is no in group or out group. There is only the love of God, poured out on everyone.

Think about that kind of life. What would it feel like for your heart to naturally be like this? Imagine your life if you were free from anger. Not because you tried really hard, but because it stopped coming naturally. Imagine your life free from lust and revenge and deception and hatred.

Wouldn't that be great? Don't you want to live like that? Don't you want to be like that?

This is the path we're on when we live in the kingdom of the heavens. The love of God washes over us. We become like him. We live in his kingdom. And we share his deep love for the world.

None of us are there yet. We're still angry. We're still full of lust. We're still bent toward revenge and manipulation. But when you believe in Jesus, and when you walk in his kingdom, you start to see these things change in your heart. It doesn't happen automatically. This is the long slow walk of following Jesus. But God is faithful. As we follow Jesus, we become like God himself.

Conclusion

Think about all the tribes in our world. Stanford and Cal Berkeley. Republican and Democrat. Blue-collar and white-collar. Upper class and lower class. All of us confined by all of the concentric circles which define our lives. All of us trapped into an identity that revolves around me at the center. There are billions of people living within their own systems with "me" at the center.

But the Sermon on the Mount offers a different kind of life. I hope you have caught a glimpse of that vision over the past few weeks. It is a stunningly beautiful way of life. The poor in spirit are blessed. Those hungry for justice are satisfied. And we live like God—without anger, lust, revenge, hatred and contempt. No matter which tribe we're in, we love others and are loved in return—a kingdom with God at the center, infused with love.

I know that a lot of you here today are pursuing that kind of life. You're following Jesus. You see this vision and you want it to be true in your life. To you, I'd say to be patient. This doesn't happen immediately. Keep at it. Persevere. Stay in prayer. Remember that the path is worth it.

Others of you here today may not feel like you know what I'm talking about. What I've spoken about sounds nice, but you don't know the next step. Maybe you come to church, and you like that enough, but you don't know how to deepen your faith. Perhaps you're not sure you believe in this Jesus in the first place. My encouragement to you is to take the next step. We have so many opportunities at this church for you to go deeper. It all starts by just showing up somewhere. Just show up and see where that leads.

If you're a man, visit Road Crew. If you're a woman, check out Women's Connection on Thursdays mornings or the Bible study on Tuesday nights. If you're a young adult, check out our Young Adult Fellowship. We also have Connect Groups and youth activities and all sorts of others ways to connect. These activities won't make you more like God. But they are all designed to form a community centered on Jesus where we can learn to walk closer with him.

At the center of all of this is God's love for us. He is at the center of the kingdom. He is the one who loved us even while we were his enemies. He is the one at work in our hearts. As we experience that love, we are drawn toward him. And we become more and more like him every day.