

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on February 5th, 2017 at Victory of the Lamb on Matthew 5:43-48.

Series: What Jesus Said (On Truth and Love)

Today's Focus: Love Your Enemies

Align Your Heart with Jesus and You'll Find No Room for Hate.

In the name of Jesus Christ, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. Amen.

A couple weeks ago I talked practically about technology use. Remember that? Author Todd Gongwer says this about our smartphones—that we need to understand that our smartphones are designed to be leveraged by others to do three things—to monetize you (to make money off you), to desensitize you (to get you to be comfortable with sin), and...do you remember what the third thing I mentioned was? To *polarize* you. In other words, to get us all to look at each other in terms of us vs them in such a way that it becomes almost impossible to have a healthy, productive conversation about anything anymore.

And so I asked you the question, “Are you aware how technology is shaping your heart?” Were you able to answer that question for yourself? Families...did you have a good family discussion about this?

If you did or you're starting to think maybe you should, I'm hoping that over the next four weeks you can. Because today we're starting a new series called *What Jesus Said*. We're going to look at *what* Jesus actually said while also trying to get at the heart of *why* he said it. And over 4 weeks we're going to wrestle with the inherent tension between truth and love. According to Jesus, we need both.

I had a Seminary professor who once said that one of the biggest frauds today is to pit truth and love against each other as if they're polar opposites. He said that doing that would be like riding in an airplane flying at 30,000 ft and asking, “Do you want the left wing or the right wing to fall off?” The best answer would be to say, “I'd like to keep both please!”

So prayerfully, my hope is that this series will help us to find the proper balance between truth and love so that we can align our hearts with Jesus. As a result I hope we can also have healthier conversations with the people in our world about the things that matter most. And so it starts today with this: **Align your heart with Jesus and you'll find no room for hate.**

Let's start this series today with prayer: Lord Jesus, you reveal the divine mercy of God and yet you never failed to speak the truth in order to do so. And you showed us what true love for others looks like—that it's not just words, it's actions. Give us hearts like yours that care deeply for the eternal welfare of all those in our world, even those we might sometimes think of as our enemies. Teach us to see all people through your eyes and to value them as you value us. Give us ears that are quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Help us to hear your words on truth and love and take them to heart. Teach us to apply them in healthy and beneficial ways. Amen.

Listen now to these words that Jesus spoke 2,000 years ago and see if they don't sound as if they were spoken for us just this week.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be children 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. 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 own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

As a child I learned song lyrics, many of you probably did too, that went like this: “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.” You good with that? Me too! It’s wonderful to know Jesus loves me! And keep your eyes open during the Super Bowl today. In the end zone, between the uprights on a field goal or extra point, see if you can find someone in the crowd holding up a sign that says “John 3:16”. You know that verse? **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son...”** You good with that? Me too! It’s wonderful to know that God so loved the world! In Bible 101 class I often say, “Go ahead and substitute your name there for *the world*, because if God so loved the world...you know what that means? God so loved you too!” How about this verse, **“Husbands, love your wives”** (Eph. 5:25). Yep, that’s in the Bible. Any wives here...you all good with that? Husbands, how about you? You good with that? (Quick hint guys...this would be a good time to nod your heads!)

Then there’s this one. **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor.’** You good with that, everybody? Or is there a little part of you that thinks, “Easy now, Pastor Ben...because it kinda depends on who your neighbor is, doesn’t it? Like if they invite you over for a Super Bowl party and hand you a beer, or if they plow your driveway with their new snow blower every so often, or at least if they don’t set off fireworks in the middle of the night while your babies are trying to sleep? Then yeah...I’m good with that if that’s in the Bible... ‘Love your neighbor.’”

It seems that’s how a lot of people in Jesus’ day wanted to understand it. The scribes and Pharisees taught that the Ten Commandments directed love towards God and love towards one’s neighbor. Conveniently though they left out a key little phrase. It turns out this isn’t just a 21st century phenomenon that happens on the internet with little memes that people create where they’re misquoting the Bible to suit their own purposes. Because even for the Jews, way back in the Law...in Leviticus 19:18 what it actually said was this: **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** That takes it up a notch, doesn’t it? That almost begs the question, “Well if that’s the case...then who is my neighbor anyway?”

And that’s exactly the question someone once asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” (cf. Luke 10:29) You remember how Jesus answered? He told a story. He said one day there was a guy who was walking down the road when he got jacked up by thugs. They stripped him naked, beat him bloody, and left him for dead. Then one after another all these people walked by, saw this poor guy, and did nothing—church workers even! They were too busy. Too distracted. They had their reasons. But then a Samaritan—a foreigner of a mixed race, someone despised and even considered an enemy by the Jews...he took pity on that poor Jewish man, broke from a cultural cycle of bigotry, and was a neighbor to him. At his own inconvenience, he accepted the risk of caring for the man and then at his own expense paid for him to receive the care he needed to completely recover.

So who’s your neighbor? Jesus’ point is that our neighbor is anyone who comes across our path in life who is in need that we have the power to help. Sometimes it’s the nameless, unknown person kicked to the curb of life that no one else seems to care about. To intervene and help is to be a neighbor, to be Christ to them, even if it costs you some time, some money, and might seem a little risky. **Love your neighbor as yourself.**

How well are you doing at this in your life? ... What would the members of your own family (who are also your neighbors!) say? ... How well are we doing this as a nation? Are we loving our neighbors as ourselves? ... That's not meant to be a politically loaded question. I'm asking, What's in your heart? ... Is it possible that "Love your neighbor as yourself" also applies to our online interactions with our fellow human beings? Absolutely.

But like I said, most of us are ok with this love your neighbor stuff at some level, right? Even the secular world has caught on that it can be beneficial to love your neighbor as yourself because then they might love you back someday. Or at least it might make you feel good, score you a few more 'likes' on social media. But this isn't what God is getting at. This isn't "love your neighbor as a self-promotion strategy". Jesus is speaking to what's in our hearts.

The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day showed what was in their hearts because although they were ok with the *Love your neighbor* part... they added a corollary: '**Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.**' Now be honest. There a part of your heart that gets where they're coming from, isn't there? It's logical when it's personal, right? If someone has insulted you, you have a right to insult them back, don't you? If you someone hurts you, you have a right to retaliate, don't you? Why listen carefully when you can lash out quickly? Instead of finding common ground, stand your ground. Instead of backing down, double down. Ascribe to them the very worst motives. Take everything they say or do in the worst possible way. After all, they probably deserve it. How many of you have an enemy that you treat like this? How many of you have become the person that someone else is thinking of right now?

Sometimes though no matter how hard we try, a few people we may feel are our personal "enemies." Or people seem to hate us. There are people whom we've offended and to whom we've apologized, but who refuse to accept our apologies and hold a grudge. There are people at work who we've angered, or who are jealous of us, or who have set themselves against us. Sometimes there are people in our families who hold a grudge against us for some mysterious reason that we can never comprehend. And there are people who seem to dislike us or wish us ill for no good reason. It's a sad part of human life. I'm not even talking right now about the people who are truly evil and would seek to do us severe harm if given the chance. There's a certain appeal to the notion 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But then Jesus says with the authority of the Son of God: 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 children of your Father in heaven.** In other words, the way that we can best show each other and the world that we are God's children saved by grace is by showing love to our enemies.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Doesn't this make you think, "Are you for real, Jesus? We're supposed to love our enemies? Are we really supposed to pray for people who hate us? For people who work against us? For people who want us to fail? For our political opponents and for classroom bullies and for conniving coworkers and for cheating ex-spouses? You're saying we're supposed to pray for them?"

Yes. Because this is the kind of love that Jesus showed us all. Think about it. What kind of love would prompt someone to die for people who not only hated him but wanted to kill him? Illogical. But that's what led Jesus to press on towards the cross. It was unconditional, determined love for self-serving, politically expedient government officials like Pontius Pilate. It was unconditional love for condemned

criminals who defiantly mocked him to his face even with their drying breaths. It was unconditional love that caused Jesus to pray even as he was being crucified: **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”** (Luke 23:34).

Who was he praying for? For Pilate who condemned him, for the Roman soldiers who tortured him, for the Jewish priests who ridiculed him, and for all his part-time followers who deserted him in the hour of his greatest need while he, and he alone, put their eternal needs ahead of his own. But was he not also praying for you and me? **“Father, forgive them...”** Yes, for you and me too! Even though we have not loved perfectly—neither God nor our neighbor—neither making the most of every opportunity to love nor even seeing clearly everyone’s needs...Jesus loved us. I can’t claim any moral high ground as the pastor standing up here because many times I have been like the priest in Jesus’ parable passing my neighbor by because I was too busy “serving God” to be distracted by some needy person again. And you can’t claim any moral high ground either no matter who you voted for and how much money you donate or where you volunteer—not when God has set the same standard for every single one of us: **Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.**

Love God. Love people. Love perfectly. Purely. And it becomes clear quickly that we have all fallen far, far short. But Jesus loved us anyway, perfectly and to fullest possible extent. **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Romans 5:8). Jesus did not have to come to our rescue. Yet he carried our sins to cross and bridged the gap between heaven and earth, between us poor sinners and our perfect, holy God. Jesus now claims us as his brothers and sisters through the baptism that links us to his death and resurrection. And he calls us to follow him even as he feeds our faith with the forgiveness of his holy supper. And he tells us, “Love.” **“Love your neighbors as yourselves. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**

It might help to understand he’s not saying we need to be fond of or be friends with our enemies. The word here for “love” is “agape”. It’s the word that means a determined, unconditional love. CS Lewis said this kind of love “is not an affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person’s ultimate good as far as it can be obtained.” It doesn’t mean I have to have fond feelings about that person or hold them in the close embrace of a friend. In fact sometimes to love my other neighbors and protect them, might mean that I have to keep some other neighbors at arm’s length. But the way I can show them love in those cases is simply and sincerely to pray for them. And pray for what? For their conversion—that they be brought to genuine repentance and the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Savior. There is no more loving thing to want for someone then their conversation to Christ so that, even if it’s impossible to live in harmony with them here on this earth, one day by God’s grace we might live together in heaven. Friends, ***align your heart with Jesus and you’ll find no room for hate.***

So how do you do this? I want to wrap up today by suggesting 4 things. Pick one and try putting it into practice.

#1. See your enemy as a fellow image bearer of God. What do I mean? God made Adam and Eve, the first human beings, in his own image. This means contrary to evolution we’re not just products of unguided time and chance. Our lives are not just random accidents. We’re not just animals made to act on instinct and our basest impulses. Every human person is a uniquely made, special creation of God made to relate to him and to each other. Our lives have meaning and purpose. So guess what? When you choose to see someone as a fellow image bearer of God, this means everyone’s life has inherent

value—from the unborn to the elderly. If we all saw our enemies as fellow image bearers of God this would prevent our criticisms from reaching de-humanizing characterizations.

#2. See your enemy as a fellow blood bought soul. This adds ultimate value to every human life. Jesus willingly left behind the bliss of heaven and took on our human flesh and blood in that very moment when a single cell was knit together by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb. Jesus valued my life, your life, every single human life that much. Ultimately, he proved just how much God values each of us when he died for us all on the cross. This makes me humble, makes me grateful, and it opens my heart to what God wants most for us all and that's for all of us to be with him in heaven. So be real careful before you tell someone "Go to hell!" Ask yourself, "Who is this person? They're a fellow blood bought soul."

#3. Recognize the Real Enemy. There's a verse that says, "**Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour**" (1 Peter 5:8). Social media can easily contribute to polarizing us because our sinful human nature has a pre-built tendency to spin stories about heroes and villains. In other words, we are constantly interpreting events in our lives by framing our own stories with characters who are heroes and those who are villains. Guess who we usually make ourselves out to be? The hero of course. And then who's the villain? Often isn't it some other person I'm called to love? But here's where we sometimes need to recognize especially in the church and in our families and marriages that the real enemy isn't each other but the devil, that roaring lion, who wants to destroy us with grudges, resentment, and stubborn unforgiving pride. So call him out and recognize what he's trying to do. In the middle of conflict call a timeout and say, "Hey, let's pray about this." And when you pray, pray against the devil that his persecution or his plans to polarize you would come to naught. James says, "**Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you**" (James 4:7).

#4. God will right all wrongs. Sometimes, finally, loving someone isn't enough. Nothing changes. And sometimes despite your best efforts, people may simply dislike you. So it's wasted energy to try to get them to like you, much less to love you. You can be open to reconciliation, but you have no control over whether someone will reconcile with you. You're not responsible for their emotions or their actions. You need to let go. And in those cases where you've been wronged, and it seems like justice has not been served, then know this truth: Jesus will one day right all wrongs. "**True and just are his judgements**" (Rev. 19:2). So practically, if your enemy's going to behave like a jerk toward you, there's no reason you have to act like a jerk toward him. You don't need to heckle a heckler. Jesus will handle them in his due time.

I pray this was helpful today. In some ways, it's a simple message, but one that will take us all a lifetime to put into practice. ***Align your heart with Jesus, and you'll find no room for hate.*** Amen.