

*Life Improvements --- Mountaintop Makeover --- Perfect Love*

*Exodus 23:1-9 & Matthew 5:43-48*

*“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Matthew 5:48*

Exodus 23:1-9

*1 You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. 2 You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice; 3 nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit. 4 When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. 5 When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free. 6 You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. 7 Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. 8 You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. 9 You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.*

Today we come to the end of chapter five in the Gospel of Matthew. We have been looking into Jesus' message from the mountaintop called “The Sermon on the Mount.” Over the past six weeks we have been challenged by Jesus' strong words—words that if we heed—will enable us to have a mountaintop makeover. In the television show “Extreme Makeover” the closing scene begins when Ty Pennington stands with the family as they all shout, “Bus Driver --- Move That Bus.” The bus moves away and you get to see the new creation of a beautiful home that has been totally rebuilt from the foundation up! Friends, this is what we're after—this is what we're hoping for...that after all of these weeks of Lent and listening—that we will be a new creation—from the inside out!

When we began this journey, we started at the end of the “Sermon on the Mount” found at the end of chapter seven of Matthew. We began with Jesus' teaching about building on the right foundation. Are you building your life on the solid rock of Jesus Christ or are you building on sinking sand? For the next five weeks, we were confronted by Jesus with a new and radical morality that calls us to be the salt and the light of the world. We heard how anger alters our lives and how some of us have anger altars that we worship at frequently. Then we heard strong words about lust and divorce, keeping our vows --- “letting our yes be yes and our no be no!” In week six, we tackled resentment, retaliation and revenge! The Hatfields and McCoys fought and had bad blood between them for 125 years—over a hog. Friends, surely we need to bury the hatchet.

Today we are confronted by Jesus' strong words about “love” and “being perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.” Our reading is the sixth and last illustration contrasting the false righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Jesus gives us a comparison of the love of the scribes and Pharisees and of the love of God. In his book, *Souvenirs of Solitude*, Brennan Manning says, “*The Sermon on the Mount is a portrait of the heart of Jesus Christ.*”<sup>i</sup> C.S. Lewis was once confronted by a friend and was told that he did not care for the Sermon on the Mount. Lewis responded to his friend, “As to ‘caring for’ the Sermon on the Mount, if ‘caring for’ here

means ‘liking’ or enjoying, I suppose no one ‘cares for’ it. Who can like being knocked flat on his face by a sledge hammer? I can hardly imagine a more deadly spiritual condition than that of a man who can read that passage with tranquil pleasure.” Let us enter into the heart of Christ and listen for His heartbeat. May our lives be changed by His “sledge-hammer” words of love.

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Matthew 5:43-48

*43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

### **LOVE OF SELF**

Carl Sandburg, American poet, novelist, and historian (1878–1967) wrote, “Love your neighbor as yourself; but don’t take down the fence.”<sup>iii</sup> The religious people of Jesus’ day had changed the teachings of the law—bending and twisting in their favor. Here we notice again what Jesus says, “**You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’**” This phrase is only part of the teaching in the Old Testament. In Leviticus 19:18 we are told --- “*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*” Over and over again in the New Testament (Matthew 19:19; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; and James 2:8) we are told to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This is one part of the “Great Commandment” yet the teachers of the law, the scribes and the Pharisees had omitted the “as you love yourself” from their formula of love. Why? Why do you think they left that part of the great commandment out?

In our Old Testament reading for this morning, we heard that the people were to show love even to the animals of their enemies. How could the Pharisees and the teachers of the law forget this part of the teaching? Omitted in their tradition was the phrase “as yourself” because it was not possible to fit this kind of love into their proud, self-righteous lives. These leaders had an extra-ordinary love of self. They thought well of themselves, they loved to be praised, honored and respected and they believed they deserved it. In Luke 18 we are told the parable of the tax-collector and the Pharisee coming to pray. The Pharisee prays, “*God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*”

What a radical teaching Jesus is delivering in this sermon. Isn’t it true that most people spend their lives doing and seeking things that are in their own interests? We spend our entire lives looking out for our

own safety, our own comfort, our own income, our own pleasure, health, personal interests and this goes on and on!

On a side note, I finished several books the past few weeks that I was off. One book that really challenged me was a book by Francis Chan called the “Forgotten God.” It is book about the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. Chan has a quote about the comforter, the Holy Spirit: why do we need the Comforter when we are already comfortable?<sup>iii</sup> This is the problem the teachers of the law and Pharisees were having. They were comfortable with themselves—they had their own **unholy trinity: me, myself and I!** It’s why they left off the “love your neighbor as yourself” part of the commandment! Watch out for the unholy trinity!

### ***LOVE OF NEIGHBOR AND ENEMIES***

The religious leaders deleted the phrase “as yourself” in their formula of love, they then added “hate your enemies.” On one hand, they deleted the teachings to their own liking and then they added their words to fit their comfort zone. Jesus says to the religious leaders of His day, “*But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...’*” Here is one of the most powerful teachings in Scripture regarding the meaning of love. The love that God commands of His people is a love so great that it even embraces enemies.

Jesus moved the mountain with these powerful words of love. The environment they were living in was very narrow-minded, exclusive and intolerant. All around Jesus stood walls and fences erected to keep their neighbor out. The religious leaders were narrowing down their love so much that they even had debates about who their neighbor was. In Luke 10 we have recorded one of the debates: a parable about the “Good Samaritan.”

In the Greek language there are four words for “love.” “Storge” is the love that is found in a family or the love of family. “Eros” is the Greek word for romantic love. “Philia” is a friendship love or the love of a brother or brotherly love. We get the word “Philadelphia” from philia-- the city of brotherly love. When Jesus is speaking of love, He is using the fourth word for “love”: the Greek word “agape.”

“Agape” is unconditional love. Agape love is the love that God is! Agape love is the love that God demonstrates! No one DESERVES agape love—it isn’t love that is earned or purchased. In all reality, we don’t deserve this kind of love—it is a gift. Agape love is God’s love!

John tries to describe this kind of love in I John 4:7-12 --- <sup>7</sup> *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.* <sup>8</sup> *Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.* <sup>9</sup> *God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into*

*the world so that we might live through him.*<sup>10</sup> *In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*<sup>11</sup> *Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*<sup>12</sup> *No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*

Paul tries to illustrate this agape love in Romans 5:8 --- *“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”*

We are called to have “agape” love for our enemies. Radical. How do we do that? We are told by Jesus to “pray for those who persecute us.” Prayer is the forerunner of mercy. Loving our enemies is not natural, it is difficult no matter who you are. But we are commanded to love our enemies. Just as we are sinners in need of God’s forgiveness and grace, so are our enemies! What Jesus is telling those on the mountain—is like us drinking from a fire hose—it was a huge dose of radical grace! Pray for your enemies.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor who stood up to Hitler and the atrocities Hitler was doing. Bonhoeffer suffered and eventually gave his life for his faith. His book “The Cost of Discipleship” is about Jesus’ teaching from the “Sermon on the Mount.” Bonhoeffer writes about this very idea-- “loving your enemies and praying for those that persecute you” with these powerful words, “This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God.”<sup>iv</sup> What a powerful image of loving our enemies and praying for them; standing by their side and bringing them to God—in prayer!

Ghassan Thomas leads one of the few public churches that emerged [in Baghdad] after Saddam Hussein was toppled. His congregation erected a sign on their building that read "Jesus Is the Light of the World" but the church was raided by bandits who left behind a threat on a piece of cardboard. "Jesus is not the light of the world, Allah is, and you have been warned." The note was signed "The Islamic Shiite Party."

In response, Pastor Ghassan loaded a van with children's gifts and medical supplies—which were in critically short supply following the American invasion—and drove to the headquarters of the Islamic Shiite Party. After presenting the gifts and supplies to the sheikh, Ghassan told the leader, "Christians have love for you, because our God is a God of love." He then asked permission to read from the Bible. Ghassan turned to Jesus' words in John 8, "I am the light of the world." He then showed the cardboard note to the sheikh. The Muslim leaders, astounded by Pastor Thomas's actions, apologized.

"This will not happen again," [the sheikh] vowed. "You are my brother. If anyone comes to kill you, it will be my neck first." The sheikh later attended Pastor Thomas' ordination service at the church.<sup>v</sup>

What an illustration of divine love --- a love that loves our enemies --- a love that prays for those that persecutes us!

So What --- **PERFECT LOVE!**

How are we doing with our love factor today? How are we doing loving others as we love ourselves? Do you love with a “storge” love --- loving just your family? Do you love with “philia” love --- having a

brotherly or sisterly love for others? Have we twisted the meaning of love in our day to only include our tastes, our wants, our needs, our desires? How many of our enemies have we stood beside and brought to throne of God and prayed for them?

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ...”*

Loving our neighbors, loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us is impossible--we are imperfect people. But through God’s perfect “agape” love, we can begin to learn how to love as our Heavenly Father loves—through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit! Now—there’s the HOLY TRINITY!

Esther Ahn Kim is a powerful testimony to this “agape” love that Jesus calls us to. During WWII, the Japanese occupied Korea. Esther was put in prison because she would not bow at the shrines that the Japanese created. Knowing that she would spend time in prison for refusing to bow to idols, Esther spent time training herself both physically and spiritually. Each day she would find and eat food that was decaying, knowing that she would be served that kind of food in prison. While preparing for prison she memorized more than one hundred chapters of the Bible and many hymns because she knew she would not be allowed to keep her Bible. She spent countless hours fasting and in prayer. These times of reading scripture, fasting and prayer enabled her to surrender her fears of being tortured.

When she was taken to prison, God used her in countless way. Esther helped a young Chinese woman convicted of killing her husband. The woman moaned incessantly and beat on the doors until the guards tied her hands behind her back. It was this woman that God called Esther to love and reach out to. Esther held the woman’s feet at night to warm them, even though the woman was covered in her own excrement. Though food rations were small, Esther gave her portions to this woman. Over time, the Chinese woman began to respond, carrying on conversation and eventually accepting the Good News of the Gospel. The woman was executed for her crime, but she went to her death alive in Christ.

God used Esther to love others as she loved herself. Murderers and swindlers who were utter outcasts were changed as the love of Christ, through Esther, healed their hearts and gave them hope. Even the jailers and the government officials noticed Esther’s agape love.

What Jesus is serving up on the mountainside is radical: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Here’s your homework for the week. It’s the “so what” for today’s message. I call it, “TAKE THE FENCE DOWN.” Your homework is a great lesson on replacing the me, myself and I unholy trinity with the real, agape-loving Holy Trinity: Find a quiet time and a quiet place, open your Bible up to Matthew 5:43-48. Make a list of all of your enemies. Make a list of those who persecute you. Go all out. List them all! Use all the paper you can! And then, get on your knees—and pray for them. Pray for them name by name and you will *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is*

*perfect.*” Who knows, maybe you will even go and load up your car with gifts and drive them over to your enemies’ homes?!! With the Holy Trinity on our side, miracles await us as we begin to learn how to use “agape” love.

We’ve been busy these past seven weeks, it’s almost time to shout, “Bus Driver, move that bus!” Will we have become a new creation? With the help of the Holy Trinity—the possibilities are endless!

Let us pray ....

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<sup>i</sup> Brennan Manning, *Souvenirs of Solitude*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. 2009

<sup>ii</sup> Carl Sandburg, *The People, Yes*

<sup>iii</sup> Francis Chan, *Forgotten God*, David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, Co., 2009

<sup>iv</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans R.H. Fuller, McMillan, New York, NY., 1960

<sup>v</sup> Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI., 2009