

August 2020

Dear Brethren:

Warm greetings to all brothers and sisters in Christ.

The clearest statement about loving our enemies is found in Matthew 5:38–43. This is not a difficult teaching to understand, but it is probably the most difficult passage in the Bible to apply. Why? Because it is about being like God. It is about being like Jesus who—while they shouted, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!"—lifted His head to heaven and said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Loving Our Enemies Fulfills God's Law

This passage is found in a section where Matthew explains the demands of the Kingdom of God in relationship to the Law (Matthew 5:17–48). Matthew, through the Holy Spirit, wants his readers to know what their relationship to the Law is now that they are Christians. He lists Old Testament precepts: You have heard that it was said: do not murder, do not commit adultery, some can divorce, follow through on every oath, you can (eye for an eye) retaliate, it is okay to hate your enemy.

These are followed by Jesus' interpretation. In each instance, Jesus' interpretation of the Old Testament, like a scalpel, cuts deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, going past the letter of the Law to the Spirit of the Law. In doing this, Jesus upholds and fulfills the essence of the Law, as He said in Matthew 5:17 (*King James Version*): "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." In these texts, Jesus is calling for Christians to have attitudes and practices in life that clearly will distinguish them from the rest of the world.

In this sense, Matthew 5:48 (*New King James Version*)—"be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect"—is a summation of the entire section. Jesus is calling the people to be perfect—not in the sense of getting it right all the time, but in the sense of being complete, whole, and unalloyed in our commitment to God and His desires, which are spelled out in these verses. These verses describe what the people of God are to look like. This is the type of people who really fulfill the Law.

Jesus picks up a motto of the day: "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." The first part, love your neighbor, comes from the Old Testament. The latter part, hate your

enemy, comes from some of the misled Jews, who at the time understood "love your neighbor" to mean, "have no regard for your enemy." Jesus rejected this interpretation and said to love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you (verse 44). What did Jesus mean by that?

Loving Your Neighbor Includes Loving Your Enemy

Neighbor means something like "friend" in this context. Jesus believes it is well and good to love our friends, but the problem in only loving one's friend is that the person is restricted in his or her love. This type of love is restrictive in that it is selective and prejudiced, because this type of love chooses only those we like and who love us in return.

Yet God's love is very different. God also loves the evil person, shown by the fact that He causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good (verse 45)—not restricting the expression of His love to only one group. God loves the unrighteous, shown by the fact that He causes the rain to fall on the righteous and unrighteous without distinguishing between the two. God does not withhold His love from either group.

Another problem with loving only our friends is that this kind of love is not generous enough. It is not lavish enough so that it spills out onto others who are not our friends. It only reaches those who love us in return. This is an eye-for-an-eye love, but love-your-enemy love is like a multi-tiered fountain from which love spills over onto a greater pool of people, enemies and friends.

How do we love our enemies, particularly when they most likely would not want us to talk to them, let alone love them? Jesus commands prayer. He does not expand on this idea, but He commands prayer because it is one intimate way in which Christians can enter into the hearts of their enemies. Prayer helps us understand what makes people tick. Through prayer we are able to feel the inner world of our enemies. Most importantly, prayer helps us know the perspective and passion of God for our enemies.

Matthew sets out two examples of loving only your neighbor (Matthew 5:46–47). In both cases, the concern is that Christians only minister and demonstrate love to those who love them in return. Christians and churches must not become mutual admiration societies.

Love-our-enemies Love Is Selfless, Outward-looking Love

In the first place, Matthew makes it clear there are serious implications for those who love only their friends. They will receive no reward in heaven when their life works are judged (2 Corinthians 5:10), because they have received their full reward on earth.

Second, loving our enemies requires an honest, humble self-appraisal.

Third, to love a friend requires death of self to a certain degree. But, to love our enemies requires death of self at the highest level. This type of love that Jesus requires of us is to be on the side of all people no matter what they might do to provoke a different reaction. For some, this means hanging in there with the rebellious son or daughter who hates you and your Christian faith. For others, it is the arrogant boss who marginalizes you. This tough love requires hanging in there until you can understand why he or she is acting and feeling a particular way.

Fourth, loving our enemy does not mean unequivocal trust. Enemies who have hurt us have forfeited their right to our trust. They are to earn our trust again. It is important not to let ourselves be victimized again. The words of Romans 12:17–18 pertain here. We are required to do what is right. We are to consider beforehand what good things we can do for others regardless of whether he or she is a friend or foe. But remember, we do not do these things in order to get an apology from someone or to gain approval. We do good toward them because it is the right thing to do.

Fifth, we must accept that loving our enemies is one of the most difficult things we ever will do and is only possible through the grace of God. We must not minimize this difficulty nor neglect the emotions in loving our enemies.

Loving our enemies is not just a cerebral exercise, although we do need to think about what it means to love our enemies and have a plan to effect it. The truth is that loving our enemies is costly and must be worked out in the world. Loving our enemies means to see them as human beings in need of the Father's love.

We understand the saying: "Now go in peace and love and serve the Lord." This includes loving our enemies. So may His grace sustain us for this most high calling.

Love for Enemies

But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you

do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. 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. 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 children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:27–36, *New International Version*).

This text ranks as one of the most extraordinary ever written! It utterly reverses human thinking about enemies and forgiveness. It spells out the way God goes about things, holding nothing against us despite all our failings. This is how Jesus lived; this is how He died for His executioners. His attitude of heart was blessed by His Father and brought Him into eternal life.

If what Jesus asks seems too much for us, we are beginning to understand that our response will depend not on ourselves alone, but on grace that comes from God. Only by receiving the Spirit that Jesus promises will we be able to witness the love, forgiveness and peace to which Jesus calls us.

Jesus invites us to respond to the world as He did—loving, blessing, praying and offering. We are called to do this, not only where there is something of which we approve, but in all circumstances.

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eduardo Y. Cambil', written in a cursive style.

Eduardo Y. Cambil