

A High Standard

Matthew 5:43-48

We come tonight to the final comparison that Jesus makes that begins with that phrase, “You have heard that it was said.” I’ve emphasized each time we’ve seen that formula that Jesus is not contradicting the Old Testament. He is not invalidating the law of God as it was given to his people through Moses. He has not saying, “You have heard that it was said “such and such” in the Old Testament, but now in the New Testament I’m going to correct that wrong idea. The reason I have been so insistent in that explanation is because of Jesus’ own words as he begins this exposition of the law of God,

Mat. 5:17 “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.”

Jesus then expounds several of the ten commandments in such a way that the applications of those commandments are intensified. People today, of course, are so quick to label that “legalism,” pressing the duties and obligations of the commandments with an intensity that makes them uncomfortable. But that is what Jesus does. And if you were given to anger or to insulting others, then you ought to feel uncomfortable when Jesus applies the sixth commandment.

v.22 “But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”

If you were given to the temptation of impure thoughts and

desires, then you would probably get uncomfortable, too.

v.28 “But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.”

If you are careless about the duties of your marital relationship or in the habit of making careless promises, then you will be uncomfortable with Jesus’ intensification of the law regarding divorce and swearing oaths. Likewise, if you indulge the spirit of retaliation, you won’t want to hear, “Do not resist the an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.”

Surely it has been obvious. Jesus did not come to abolish the law. And so when he says, “You have heard that it was said,” you will realize that he is correcting the errors of the Pharisees. He is correcting the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, who thought themselves to be good keepers of the law. He would later in his ministry call them “whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Mat. 23:27-28)

That’s Jesus’ focus in this section in the sermon on the mount.

I. THE ERROR OF HYPOCRISY.

That hypocrisy is a bit more obvious in the words of our text this afternoon,

v.43

That, of course, is nowhere to be found in the Bible, but it

surely demonstrates both the spirit and the method of the Pharisees. It shows forth blatant hypocrisy for all that it is worth. The first half of the sentence is not only true, but the very essence of the law summarized in what Jesus called the second great commandment. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It is the second half of that sentence that gives us such pause, doesn’t it? “...and hate your neighbor.”

Now, for all the proper criticism of the Pharisees, let’s give them credit for this one thing, they were honest! They were honest enough to express their hypocrisy honestly, so they understood the commandment to love your neighbor this way, that you may hate your enemy! So it all comes down to choosing your neighbors! That is the hypocrisy.

A. The error of limiting your love by choosing your neighbors.

It’s a classic evasion of responsibility common to the fallen nature of man. Find the limit. Find the extent of your duty, and satisfy yourself that you have fulfilled your obligation. The law, however, had its emphasis on the extensive duties of the law. So the command to love God was intensified with that prepositional phrase, “with all your heart, with all your strength.” The point is, somewhat obviously, that you can never claim a full and complete discharge of your duty as if you can then quit. Mission accomplished. No, never. You love God with all your strength, and if you have any strength left over, love him with that as well.

And love your neighbor, again with an unlimited and unending responsibility, love your neighbor as yourself. As if he were yourself. Just like the command to love God, the intensity is emphasized and the obligations are magnified. When it comes to the law of love, you can never claim that you have successfully finished that project and now it’s time to move on to the next.

But that is exactly what the Pharisees did. They took a command with an emphasis on the intensity of its duty, and they found a way to limit it. They emphasized the idea of “neighbor.”

Do you remember the occasion when Jesus was asked that question, “Who is my neighbor?” It’s found in Luke 10. A lawyer asked Jesus that question intending to put him to the test. Verse 25, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” The idea was, tell me to do, and another person might argue that something else was necessary. But Jesus answered with the fullness of the duty of the law of love, “love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now the lawyer was in trouble, so he asked a second question that unintentionally revealed the depth of his hypocrisy.

Luke 10:29 “But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, And who is my neighbor?”

The answer to that question is the parable of the Good Samaritan, which ends with Jesus turning the question all around. Instead of answer the question, “who is my neighbor,” Jesus’ conclusion is,

Luke 10:36 “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? 37 He said, The one who showed him mercy. And Jesus said to him, You go, and do likewise.”

So stop asking “who is my neighbor” in order to limit your responsibility to love, and go be a neighbor yourself!

We can become guilty of this same hypocrisy, can’t we? We limit the extent of our love. We desire to avoid the biblical responsibilities of Christian love within the body of Christ. We choose who we’re going to be nice to, who we are going to talk to,

who we are going to befriend. Others are left out, out of the clique, out of the group. They don't belong. But inside the group we'll exercise the fullness of deep friendship.

But that's all wrong. It is nothing less than this same error of limiting your love by choosing your neighbors. The point is, you are to be a neighbor. The point is, you are to be a friend, not one who goes around identifying his friends so that he can be unkind to everyone else.

There is another error Jesus identifies here as he teaches his disciples about the law of love, and that is,

B. The error of ignoring the example of God.

v.45

Love your neighbor, so that you can be like God. Or perhaps more common in our language, love your neighbor as a demonstration of your godliness. To be godly is to be god-like. Godliness is God-likeness. And in this clear sense, God is good to everyone. God shows his goodness, his love, to everyone. "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

A good cross reference is certainly,

Luke 6:35 "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. 36 Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

In another context, we can talk about God's special love, his electing, redeeming love that he shows only to the objects of his redemption. But the context here is much more general, much more broad. God is merciful. He is kind, even to unbelievers, to

the ungrateful and to those who are evil. We could call that common grace. It is God's universal love, his consistent love shown to all men, "the just and the unjust."

Thus the hypocrisy of the Pharisees is that they claimed a righteousness that was very different from the example of God himself. It's a strong rebuke, for they had replaced genuine godliness with hypocrisy.

v.44 "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."

There is a third error to be noted, and not surprisingly it is,

C. The error of self-righteous pride.

Just look at how Jesus cuts right to the core issue of their wicked hearts. They claimed to be good, to be superior in their goodness. They claimed to be righteous. After all, they loved their neighbors! But Jesus wasn't very impressed.

v.46

Ouch. The tax collectors were considered the very worst of sinners, the lowest of the low, the most despised of all. You Pharisees are no better than tax collectors! The point is obvious, it is easy to love those who love you. It's easy to be good to people who are friends! It's easy to be kind to those who show you kindness. Anyone can do that, even Gentiles, as he says in verse 47. Another low blow to the Pharisees, who considered the Gentiles with disdain and prejudice that was not at all disguised. The Gentiles were dogs, the scum of the earth.

v.47

Jesus rebukes their self-righteousness and their pride. And his words ought to do the same for us. How wrong it is to separate yourself and isolate yourself from the relationships that might be a little bit harder for you. How wrong it is when, in showing love to one person, you withhold that love from someone else. How destructive that is the life of the church.

So don't look for ways to limit the extend of your responsibility to love. Rather, ask God to enable you to love just as fully and as faithfully as Jesus teaches you to do. It is a high standard. It is,

II. THE CALL OF DISCIPLESHIP.

And it makes people uncomfortable today. And verse 48 makes them uncomfortable.

v.48

How can that be? Isn't that impossible? What does that mean? Isn't that legalism? Many Christians give up hope of understanding what Jesus says, and many deny the significance of it. They just ignore the whole verse. But, honestly, that isn't an alternative for us, is it? Jesus' call of discipleship is nothing less than this, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

One of the main problems with have with that verse is misunderstanding the word "perfect." We almost instantly provide our minds with the definition, "sinlessness." "Perfect" means "sinless perfection." It means to be without sin. And so we rightly conclude, that's impossible. And we think in terms of,

1 John 1:8 "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

So let me affirm, verse 48 does not mean that you or I will ever achieve sinless perfection and live without sin in this age,

before Jesus returns and before our souls are glorified at death. It does not mean that you could somehow be able to say, "I have no sin..." That's the easy part of the explanation. But what does it mean? That's the hard part.

But actually, its not so hard. The Greek word for perfect means to accomplish a goal. To complete a task. To finish a project. It is a form of the word telos, and the important idea is the end that has been determined. The purpose. So the meaning here is that you as a Christian are called by God to reach this goal. God has a purpose, there is an "end" in mind. That goal is "perfection." We could, perhaps, translate it "completion." Or even "maturity." According to Jesus, that is,

A. God's goal for our lives.

Perfection. Completion. God is always working to bring about that goal. Typically, we would label the process by which we are accomplishing that goal as sanctification. And listen to what Paul writes to the Thessalonians,

1 Thes. 5:23 "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."

Do you see that same sense of purpose, God's purpose. And completion. "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely." Completely has that same Greek root, "perfect." It's actually a compound word, "completely or wholly perfect." Wholly complete. That's God's goal in terms of your sanctification.

Or I could read,

Phil. 1:6 "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

Bring it to completion. Guess what the Greek word is there as well! Similarly,

1 John 4:16 “So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17 By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.”

His love is perfected with us. It accomplishes its purpose.

I fear these days that we are so afraid of being charged with legalism that we are afraid to speak this way, the way Jesus speaks. We are so afraid of denying grace that we shy away from the emphasis that Jesus gives to his disciples as the conclusion of this exposition of the ten commandments. Let me read it for you again.

v.48

So you are saved by grace through faith, apart from works, so that no one can boast. You earn nothing yourself. You contribute nothing in terms of merit, what you deserve. All of that is true, and I must proclaim it faithfully if I am to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. But I must also proclaim to you God’s will for your life. Your sanctification, your holiness. I must proclaim and lay before you God’s goal for your life, God’s purpose. People of God, he is completing his work of redemption, that work he began in you. He is in the process of sanctifying you completely. That’s the idea of Jesus when he says, “You must be perfect.” That is the call of discipleship.

With one more important point, which is,

B. God’s example for our lives.

I’ve already read the whole verse a number of times.

v.48

Really, that is no different in meaning than when Peter writes, 1 Peter 1:14 “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

We shouldn’t be afraid to talk this way. This isn’t legalism. Rather, this is sanctification. And God is our example. His goal is to make us God-like. His purpose is to make us godly.

So do not think that Jesus came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. In his own words, “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished... 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

v.48 “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

And what does that mean? It means that you can’t pick your neighbors, identifying which people you choose to love because they love you. You can’t limit your duties and responsibilities before God’s law in order to make yourself seem proud and successful.

At the end of the day, that proper perspective should do two very important things for you. First, remind you again and again of your need and dependence upon the finished work of Jesus Christ. You need the forgiveness of your sins which is given to you as a gift of his grace. And you need his grace to be at work within you, to will and to do that which is right. You must depend upon him to enable you to do that which he commands you to do.

You are ever, always, totally dependent upon Jesus for everything.

And then, second, this perspective should motivate you to pursue that same goal for yourself as Jesus identifies. It is to be the very purpose of your life. Godliness, maturity, holiness, progress in sanctification. Call it what you want, but don't forget what Jesus says about it.

v.48 "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."