

Apprenticed to Jesus: Indiscriminate Love

Matthew 5:43-48

Gordon Mitchell is a woodworker in Ontario, Canada. He makes everything from desks to outdoor furniture. He built his own shop with the help of his thirteen-year-old daughter “and a ranch house to go along with it.” If you went into Mitchell’s shop on a dark November night, you might hear the motor from his table saw or his drill press, but you wouldn’t see a thing. That’s because Mitchell does his work in the dark with the lights off – not to save energy, but because he is completely blind.

There is small fraternity of blind woodworkers around the world. On the one hand, blind woodworkers have challenges that sighted woodworkers don’t face. They have to work quite a bit slower. On occasion they have to use specialized tools such as tape measures that click inch by inch or rulers with Braille markings. On the other hand, blind woodworkers develop perceptions and skills that others don’t always have; they often have a deeper and more intimate knowledge about wood and certain aspects of woodworking. For example, the most common injury when using a table saw comes from “kickback” – which occurs when a board binds or catches and kicks back toward you. I’ve had boards fly back past my ear before. Mitchell avoids kickback by listening for variation in the hum of the motor or by feeling vibrations in the board he’s pushing through the saw. Most people are oblivious to sound and vibrations; they just power the board through the blade no matter what.

Another example involves a blind woodworker named David Albrektson. He can recognize whether a board is maple, walnut, pine, or some other wood by its smell when he cuts into it or by simply running a fingernail across the grain. Those are perceptions that a sighted person might not have. These are sensitivities that are developed over time and with great care.

I tell you about blind woodworkers because today we are going to look at a passage of Scripture that demands that we develop perceptions and skills that we don’t naturally have. Like blind woodworkers, we will have to be sensitive to realities that other people completely ignore. In Matthew 5 Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Most people treat their enemies based on how they feel or what they think is fair. But if you are going to love your enemies, you are going to have to perceive the heart of God. You are going to have to cultivate the ability to see people the way God sees people and to treat people the way God has treated you. As we’ll see, this will involve being sensitive to realities that most people completely ignore. We’ll need a deeper, more intimate knowledge of God than ever before.

Jesus’ Teaching on Indiscriminate Love (Matthew 5:43-48) You may or may not be able to identify a person in your life that you would officially label an “enemy” – someone who is openly antagonistic and who opposes you every chance they get. If you can identify an enemy, keep that person in mind as we hear Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:43-48. If you can’t identify an enemy, think of someone who has wronged you. Learning to love people who’ve wronged us (or even annoying people) is good training for loving our enemies.

In verse 43 Jesus quotes a saying common in His day:

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.'

The first half of that saying is from Leviticus 19:18 which reads:

18 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

The command to “love your neighbor as yourself” was clear enough. But in Jesus’ day, people wrangled over the question, “Just who is my neighbor?” You can define “neighbor” narrowly or broadly; you are therefore responsible to love a few people or a lot of people. In Luke 10 Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in order to make clear that your neighbor is anyone you encounter in need. This was the intent of the Old Testament, but not everyone believed and taught this. There was a monastic community that lived by the Dead Sea, for example, taught “Love the brothers; hate the outsider” (See Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 52). In this way people justified their hatred for various groups of people. Of course in our day people also find ways to justify their hatred toward and their discrimination against people different than them.

In verse 44 Jesus basically says that when it comes to love, we shouldn’t discriminate against our enemies. Jesus says that our love should be indiscriminate when He says:

44 "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you

If you love someone, you positively want the best for them. You are committed to their good. This is the exact opposite of what most people want for their enemies. Most people want their enemies to experience terrible things. But not Jesus’ disciples; we are to love our enemies, seeking the best for them. Love will look different in different circumstances but Paul’s description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 expresses the spirit of love rather universally:

4 Love is patient, love is kind, *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

For example, since “love is not provoked,” if you love your enemies you won’t live in a continual state of anger toward them; their words and behavior won’t provoke you to anger. Instead of treating them harshly, you’ll be patient and kind. Can you imagine treating your enemies that way?

And Jesus says to “pray for those who persecute you.” Those who persecute you are those who pursue you (or “come at you”) because of your loyalty to Christ. Sometimes persecution is violent and persistent. At other times persecution is more relational: people mock you or make fun of you because of your convictions. I had a friend in college who would go into his living room to spend time in Scripture and prayer; when he did so his dad would say, “Going into the temple?” It was just his way of poking fun at his son’s newfound faith in Christ.

When people persecute you, Jesus says to pray *for* them, not pray against them. Jesus did this very thing when He was crucified. Here’s John Stott’s comment:

Jesus seems to have prayed for his tormentors actually while the iron spikes were being driven through his hands and feet; indeed the imperfect tense suggests that he kept praying, kept repeating his entreaty, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). If the cruel torture of crucifixion could not silence our Lord's prayer for his enemies, what pain, pride, prejudice or sloth could justify the silencing of ours? (Stott, p. 119).

The command of Jesus is clear: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. As I mentioned last week when we talked about replacing revenge with generosity, this sounds good here on Sunday morning, but how can we actually do this in everyday life? When our enemies try to make our lives miserable or when people belittle us for our faith, everything within us wants to say, "Fine! Two can play this game. I'm going to try to make you miserable and I'm going to belittle you!" How do we learn to live better than that?

Verses 45 through 48 make clear that Jesus wants us to learn to learn to perceive people the way our heavenly Father does; Jesus wants us to be sensitive to the reality that God's children can and should be like Him. Jesus wants us to live with the conviction, "I love my enemies because my heavenly Father loves His enemies." Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors . . .

45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

There is a sense in which God's love is indiscriminate: God doesn't discriminate against anybody when He causes the sun to rise or the rain to fall. He causes the sun to rise on the good and the evil. He sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Theologians call this "common grace." Since God shows love indiscriminately, we should too.

In verses 46 and 47 Jesus points out that there's nothing particularly distinctive (or righteous) about loving family and friends.

46 "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

Jesus mentions tax collectors because they were considered to be bankrupt ethically and religiously. Tax collectors in Israel were despised by their fellow Jews first of all because they collected taxes for the Romans who occupied their land, and second because they made their money by adding to what the Romans demanded. And so they were viewed as traitorous and corrupt. Jesus' point is that even they loved people who loved them. They loved their mothers and wives and children. Jesus wants us to understand that there's nothing particularly virtuous about loving people who love us. Do you love anybody who doesn't also love you?

47 "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

A greeting was a sign of friendship and acceptance. Jesus points out that even Gentiles – who were considered profane and unclean – greeted their friends and family. We set our standards incredibly low if we greet only those who greet us.

48 "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is a very fitting conclusion to the antitheses we've seen so far in the Sermon on the Mount. Instead of shooting for the commonly-accepted righteousness of our day and our culture, our righteousness should emulate that of our heavenly Father: . . . *you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*. When we hear the word "perfect" we often think "sinless" but the idea is more that of something being mature or fulfilling its rightful purposes. When it comes to love, we don't settle for the stunted, immature type of love that we see around us. We exhibit a mature, full-blown love that we've learned from our heavenly Father.

And here is where we will need to be like blind woodworkers and develop perceptions and sensitivities that others don't have. That's because we are bound by covenant to a God who says, "I love My enemies, therefore you should love your enemies." This demands that ***we pay attention to the heart of God toward people***. We don't act on the basis of what people "deserve" or on the basis of what seems fair; God hasn't given us what we deserve and hasn't treated us "fairly" – He has lavished grace on us in Christ Jesus. Therefore we treat others the same way. We act in a way that shows off our family resemblance with God. There is no guarantee that the people whom we love will acknowledge or appreciate what we're doing. It's a wonderful bonus if they do, but that's not the main thing. The main thing is that we are like our Father in heaven.

Some of you are in situations in which it will be very costly for you to love your enemies. You may even have family and friends who counsel you and tell you to reciprocate and try to make their life as miserable as they've tried to make yours. In other words, loving your enemies will require a power far beyond your ability. You will need the mind of Christ toward your enemies.

Learning to Love Indiscriminately:

I want to give a couple of suggestions on how we can learn to love indiscriminately – the way we've been talking about this morning. I was watching my son play violin the other night. His ability to play the violin is the result of years of steady, disciplined practice. He didn't just sit down one day and try really, really hard to play the violin. In the same way, you and I won't be able to love our enemies by trying really, really hard. We have to train ourselves in the habits of love. We have to cultivate a sensitivity to the heart of God over time. So I want to give a short-term strategy and a long-term strategy for learning to love indiscriminately.

A short-term strategy for learning to love indiscriminately: ***Pray for people who wrong you***. If we want to develop the capacity to pray for those who persecute us – who are antagonistic to us because of our loyalty to Jesus – we need to be in the habit of praying for people who wrong us in everyday situations. Unless we are in the habit of praying for disagreeable people in general, what makes us think we'll be prone to pray for people who actually persecute us? It's been said that you shouldn't weave the parachute after you jump out of the plane; it's a little when you're in a free-fall. In the same way we don't wait until we're persecuted to learn how to pray for people who wrong us; we begin in everyday situations.

One Friday earlier this fall I drove my Buick to Home Depot; the Buick had the type of door handle with a button you push with your thumb. When I came out of Home Depot and walked to my car, I saw that someone had put a blob of freshly-chewed bubble gum on the push button. I just stopped in my tracks because I couldn't believe somebody would do that. I pulled it off and

threw it away. As I drove off I was muttering under my breath, “Who would do something like that?” I decided it was probably a guy between the ages of 18 and 22; he was probably with a friend or two and was just showing off. Earlier that morning I had read this passage about praying for those who persecute you. Obviously it wasn’t a case of persecution, but this 20-year-old male had wronged me. So I prayed for him – that God would give him a life and that he would start being nice to people.

That’s a silly example, but I do think that a short-term strategy for learning how to pray for enemies is to pray for people who wrong you in everyday situations. This very week – maybe this very day – someone will wrong you. In response you can simply pray for them. Instead of muttering under your breath, talk with God about what you’re feeling and about what He might want for their lives.

A long-term strategy for learning to love indiscriminately: ***Receive and experience the cleansing, healing, refining love of God every opportunity you get.*** Jesus’ teaching presupposes that His disciples experience and grasp the love of God. Without that experiential knowledge of God’s love, the idea of loving our enemies will seem like a strange, unreasonable way to live. With a deep experiential knowledge of God’s love, we will perceive things that others miss; we will develop skills that allow us to treat people with more generosity than we ever imagined.

At different times I’ve heard people say that you shouldn’t emphasize the love of God too much because it will make you soft. Instead you should balance out the love of God with the wrath of God or the severity of God. I would agree that we shouldn’t neglect anything that is revealed about God – His severity, His judgment, His wrath, etc. But I think it is profoundly misguided to think that the love of God ever makes a person soft or complacent. Perhaps shallow, superficial head knowledge of God’s love would do that. But the person who is ravished by the cleansing, healing, refining love of God is not soft or complacent. That person is fierce in his/her love for other people.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 that “the love of Christ ***controls us***, having concluded this that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.” The love of Christ was the controlling influence in Paul’s life; Paul no longer lived for himself but for Jesus.

As a long-term strategy for learning to love your enemies, soak in the love of God every chance you get. When you read the Word, allow God to impress upon you how deeply He loves you. When we sing, don’t be passive or detached; don’t waste the opportunity to receive and experience the love of God in fresh ways. In a few minutes we will rehearse the love of God when we sing “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us.” When you experience the sun and the rain, realize they too are expressions of the love of God.

If you and I have an intuitive understanding of the cleansing, healing, refining love of God, loving our enemies will also be intuitive. In specific situations, we will realize that God is only calling us to treat others how He has treated us.

We are going to take some time now to respond to Jesus’ teaching. Lisa will come play the piano. As she plays, I’d encourage you to pray about situations that have come to your mind in light of Jesus’ teaching. You may want to pray about what love even looks like in your

circumstances with your enemies. You may want to actually pray for those who have wronged you or persecuted you. You may want to express to God that you need to receive His love in new and fresh ways.