The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION SEVENTEEN — Love Your Enemies: The Summit

Part Three: The Greater Righteousness (concluded) · Texts: Matthew 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–36

The Texts

> **Matthew 5:43–45** *You have heard… 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 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; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good…*
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> **Luke 6:27–28, 35** *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you… you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.*

The Summit

For six sessions now we have been climbing. Through the great contrasts — anger, desire, divorce, oaths, the turning of the cheek — Jesus has been driving one command after another down past the surface to its root. And now, at last, we reach the peak. The highest, hardest, most beautiful thing he ever asked of anyone. Everything has been climbing toward this single sentence, and there is no path around it.

"Love your enemies."

Not tolerate them. Not put up with them. Not merely refrain from harming them. Love them — the people who have hurt you, who despise you, who would do you harm if they could. It is the most distinctive command in all of Jesus' teaching, the one thing that most sets his people apart from the world, and — let us be honest — the one we are most desperate to explain away. So we are not going to explain it away. We are going to climb it.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

A Saying, Not a Scripture

Watch how Jesus sets it up: "you have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" And here we have to be careful, because the two halves of that sentence do not have the same source. "Love your neighbor" is straight out of the Torah — from Leviticus, one of the great commands of Israel's Law. But "hate your enemy"? That phrase appears nowhere in the Bible. Not in the Law, not in the Prophets, nowhere. It is a human gloss — a popular saying that had grown up around the command like a weed, a way of shrinking "neighbor" down to "my own kind" and quietly licensing contempt for everyone outside the fence. So once again — and this matters — Jesus is not overturning Moses. He is doing the opposite. He is taking the Torah's own command to love, and blowing the walls off the little

circle we had drawn around it. Love your neighbor — yes, the Law says so; and Jesus says: your neighbor is far bigger than you thought. Big enough to include the enemy.[1]

Love Is Something You Do

Now, before the command crushes anyone, hear the relief hidden inside it. Jesus is not commanding you to feel warm affection for the person who wounded you. He is not asking you to like your enemy, or to summon fond feelings on demand — you cannot command a feeling, and he does not try. The word he uses is agapē, and agapē is not an emotion. It is a settled orientation of the will — a choice to seek another's good, whether or not you like them, whether or not they deserve it. And look how Luke fills it in — it is all verbs. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Give. Love here is not something you feel; it is something you do. Which is the best news in this whole hard passage: it means you can actually begin to obey it today, right now, no matter what your feelings are doing — because it was never your feelings he asked for. It was your hands, your words, your prayers, your will. Love, practiced — not professed.[2]

Because That Is What God Does

Why on earth would anyone love like this? Jesus gives the reason, and it goes all the way up to the top. "Love your enemies… 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 the unrighteous." Do you hear it? God's love is indiscriminate. The sun does not check your morality before it warms your face. The rain does not skip the fields of the wicked and water only the fields of the good. God pours out his goodness on friend and enemy alike — the grateful and the ungrateful, the deserving and the undeserving, the ones who love him and the ones who curse him. And to love your enemy, Jesus says, is simply to act like your Father. To bear the family resemblance. Luke puts it plainly: "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful… he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."[3]

We have circled back to this again and again — the merciful who are shown mercy, the peacemakers called children of God — and here it reaches its summit. The person who loves an enemy looks more like God than at any other moment, because enemy-love is not some extreme outlier of God's character. It is the very center of it. It is what God is like.

Anyone Can Love Their Own

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[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course; the fuller version is Luke 6:27–36, the heart of the Sermon on the Plain. "Love your neighbor" is Leviticus 19:18; "hate your enemy" appears nowhere in the Torah or Prophets — it is a popular gloss (restricting "neighbor" to one's own), which Jesus expands rather than an Old Testament command he overturns.

[2]The love commanded is agapē—not affection or liking (which cannot be commanded) but a settled orientation of active goodwill and concrete action: "do good… bless… pray… give" (Luke 6:27–28, 35). One can obey it regardless of one's feelings. See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, and Glen Stassen and David Gushee, Kingdom Ethics.

[3]The ground is the imitatio Dei: God "makes his sun rise on the evil and the good" (5:45) and "is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Luke 6:35). Enemy-love is God's own character; to practice it is to bear the family likeness—the "children of God" of the peacemakers (5:9) and the mercy of 5:7 / Luke 6:36.

And then Jesus quietly exposes how small our ordinary "love" really is. "If you love those who love you, what reward is that? Even the tax collectors do that. And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than anyone else?" The world's love runs in tidy circles. We love our own. We love the people who love us back, who are useful to us, who are pleasant to be around, who belong to our group. And here is the uncomfortable truth: that is not special. That is not even particularly Christian. That is just nature. Every tribe on earth, every clan, every gang, every mob loves its own fiercely.

The Kingdom's love does the one thing the world's love never does: it breaks the circle. It reaches the person on the outside — the one who cannot repay, will not repay, does not deserve it, the enemy. Loving your own is instinct; any creature can do it. Loving your enemy is grace — and grace, as it turns out, is the family business.

"Be Perfect" — What It Really Means

The passage ends with a line that has crushed a great many tender consciences: "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And if "perfect" means flawless — sinless, spotless, never a wrong step — then this is a sentence of pure despair, because not one of us qualifies, and we might as well close the book. But we have met this word before, back with the pure in heart, and it does not mean flawless. The Greek is teleios: complete, whole, mature, brought all the way to its intended goal. And here is the clincher — Luke records this very same line as "be merciful, as your Father is merciful." Which tells us exactly what "perfect" means in Jesus' mouth: a love that is complete, a love that leaves no one out. To be "perfect" as God is perfect is not to have a flawless record; it is to have a love that has reached its full extent — that has finally stopped drawing lines, stopped excluding, stopped short at the edge of the circle. Not a perfect performance. A complete love.[4]

And that is the summit of the entire Sermon. The "greater righteousness" Jesus promised all the way back in verse 20 — here it is, at the top of the mountain, and it turns out to be this: a love that excludes no one. Not even the enemy. Because God's love excludes no one.

What Enemy-Love Is Not

And because this is the highest and most easily twisted command of them all, we have to be as clear here as we have tried to be all along about what it does not mean. To love your enemy does not mean pretending they have not harmed you, or calling their evil good, or quietly dropping the demand that a real wrong be made right — mercy, we said, is never the abandonment of justice. It does not mean standing still in harm's way, or letting yourself be destroyed. And it does not mean lying down in passivity before evil — remember just last session; you can love your enemy and still resist their evil, fiercely and nonviolently, at the very same time. What enemy-love refuses is not justice. It is hatred. It is the refusal to let your enemy reach inside you and turn you into a mirror of themselves.[5]

[4] "Be perfect" (teleios, 5:48) means complete, whole, brought to its intended goal—not flawless or sinless. Luke renders the same line "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (6:36), interpreting "perfection" as a love that excludes no one. See Sessions Six and Seven on this word.

And here is why this matters so much precisely for people who burn for justice: only enemy-love can keep the fight for a better world from curdling into the very cruelty it set out to defeat. Dr. King understood this to his bones — he was relentless, unbending, in the struggle for justice, and he refused, as a matter of iron principle, to hate the people he was struggling against, because he knew that hatred would slowly remake him into another version of them. You can burn for a world set right and love your enemy at the same time. In fact, if you want to stay human while you fight, you must.

The Doable First Step

So where on earth do you start with a command this high? Right where Jesus points: "pray for those who persecute you." You may not be able to conjure a single warm feeling toward your enemy — but you can pray for them, by name. And here is the quiet mercy tucked inside that command: it is nearly impossible to keep hating someone you are genuinely praying for. Prayer for an enemy is a slow solvent, and the thing it loosens first is not their heart but yours. So start there. Bless where you would curse. Pray where you would rage. Do one small, concrete good where you would rather retaliate. That is the trailhead up this summit — and it is open to you today.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread, and watch it reach its absolute peak. All along we have asked the same question of every teaching: where does this increase someone else's freedom and dignity, and what does it cost us? And here that question arrives at its outer limit — the freedom and dignity of the enemy, even the enemy, purchased at the price of my hatred and my cherished right to revenge. This is freedom-for-others carried all the way out to the one person who least "deserves" it — which is exactly, precisely, where God carries it. So ask with me: who is my enemy — the person, the group, the name I have quietly filed under "them," outside the reach of my love? And what would it look like, this week, to will their good and pray for them by name? *Freedom for others may cost us our hatred and our sense of righteous superiority — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- "Love your enemies" is the most distinctive thing Jesus ever said — and the one we most want to soften. How have you heard it explained away?
- Jesus commands love as action, not affection — do good, bless, pray, give. How does it change things to know you can obey without first feeling it?
- God "makes his sun rise on the evil and the good." What does it mean that enemy-love is the center of God's character, not the exception?

[5]Enemy-love is not the condoning of evil, the abandonment of justice, or passivity before harm (see Sessions Six, Fourteen, and Sixteen); it refuses hatred and vengeance, not the pursuit of a world set right. Martin Luther King Jr. insisted on loving the enemy precisely so the struggle for justice would not reproduce the enemy's cruelty. Safety and justice remain goods God defends.

- We said enemy-love is not the abandonment of justice, or staying in harm, or passivity. Why is it so important to hold love and justice together?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. Who is your enemy — and what would it look like to pray for them by name?

This Week — A Practice

Two movements, right at the trailhead. First, name and pray for one enemy. Choose one person or group you have written off as "them," and pray for them by name, every day this week — not that they would get what is coming to them, but for their genuine good — and notice honestly what the praying does in you. Second, do one concrete good. Perform one small, active kindness toward someone you don't like or who has wronged you — Luke's "do good… bless." And hold the guardrails as you go: this is about the disposition of your heart and small acts of will, never about returning to danger or dropping a just cause. You can love an enemy and keep yourself safe and keep working for justice, all at once. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, most of all this part of it, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead — the End of Part Three

With this, we reach the top of the great contrasts, and Part Three — the Greater Righteousness — comes to a close. We have watched Jesus drive command after command to its root, and seen the whole climb resolve into a single, towering summit: love that leaves no one out. Next session we begin Part Four, and the Sermon turns a corner — from how we treat other people to how we practice our devotion to God. "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them." Jesus turns to giving, and prayer, and fasting — and we'll find that the enemy he keeps hunting is a familiar one: the hunger to be seen.

Benediction

So go this week and climb — not all at once, but a single step at a time, up the highest road there is. Love the ones it makes no sense to love. Pray, by name, for the person you would rather hate. Do the small, stubborn good where the world says retaliate. Refuse to let your enemy turn you into their mirror, and refuse, just as firmly, to stop seeking the world set right. And when it feels impossible — as it will — remember whose children you are: the sun that rises this morning on friend and enemy alike is your Father's, and he is only asking you to love the way he already loves you. Blessed are those who love their enemies, for they are, in that very moment, the truest children of God.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION SEVENTEEN

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still.]

Welcome back to the table. For six sessions now, we've been climbing — through the great contrasts, anger and desire and divorce and oaths and turning the cheek, Jesus driving one command after another down to its root. And now, at last, we reach the peak. The highest, hardest, most beautiful thing he ever asked of anyone. Everything's been climbing toward this one sentence, and there's no path around it.

"Love your enemies."

Not tolerate them. Not put up with them. Love them — the people who've hurt you, who despise you, who'd harm you if they could. It's the most distinctive thing Jesus ever said, the one thing that most sets his people apart — and, let's be honest, the one we're most desperate to explain away. So we're not going to explain it away. We're going to climb it.

[A saying, not a scripture.]

Watch how he sets it up: "you have heard, 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" And we have to be careful, because those two halves don't come from the same place. "Love your neighbor" is straight out of the Torah — Leviticus. But "hate your enemy"? That phrase is nowhere in the Bible. Not the Law, not the Prophets, nowhere. It's a human gloss — a popular saying that grew up around the command like a weed, shrinking "neighbor" down to "my own kind." So once again Jesus isn't overturning Moses — he's doing the opposite. He takes the Torah's own command to love and blows the walls off the little circle we'd drawn around it. Your neighbor, he says, is bigger than you thought. Big enough to include the enemy.

[Love is something you do.]

Now, before that crushes anyone, hear the relief hidden inside it. Jesus is not commanding you to feel warm affection for the person who wounded you. You can't command a feeling, and he doesn't try. The word is agapē — and agapē isn't an emotion. It's a settled choice of the will to seek another's good, whether or not you like them, whether or not they deserve it. Look how Luke fills it in — it's all verbs. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Give. Love here isn't something you feel — it's something you do. Which is the best news in this whole hard passage, because it means you can start obeying it today, no matter what your feelings are doing. He never asked for your feelings. He asked for your hands, your words, your prayers. Love, practiced — not professed.

[Because that's what God does.]

Why would anyone love like this? Jesus gives the reason, and it goes all the way to the top. "Love your enemies, so that you may be children of your Father — for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." God's love is indiscriminate. The sun doesn't check your morality before it warms your face. The rain doesn't skip the fields of the wicked. God pours out good on friend and enemy alike. And to love your enemy is simply to act like your Father. Luke says it flat out: "be merciful as your Father is merciful — he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." We keep coming back to this

— the merciful shown mercy, the peacemakers called children of God — and here it hits the summit. The person who loves an enemy looks more like God than at any other moment, because enemy-love isn't an outlier of God's character. It's the center of it.

[Anyone can love their own.]

And then Jesus exposes how small our usual "love" is. "If you love those who love you, what reward is that? Even the tax collectors do that." The world's love runs in tidy circles — we love our own, the people who love us back, who are useful, who belong to our group. And that's not special. It's just nature — every tribe and clan and mob loves its own. The Kingdom's love does the one thing the world's never does: it breaks the circle. It reaches the one outside — who can't repay, won't repay, doesn't deserve it, the enemy. Loving your own is instinct. Loving your enemy is grace — and grace is the family business.

[Be perfect.]

The passage ends with a line that's crushed a lot of tender consciences: "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And if "perfect" means flawless, this is a sentence of despair — nobody qualifies. But we've met this word before. The Greek is teleios — complete, whole, brought to its goal. And Luke records the exact same line as "be merciful, as your Father is merciful." Which tells you what "perfect" means here: a love that's complete, that leaves no one out. Not a flawless record — a complete love, one that's finally stopped drawing lines at the edge of the circle. And that's the summit of the whole Sermon: the greater righteousness, all the way up, is a love that excludes no one — not even the enemy — because God's love excludes no one.

[What it's not — clear and firm.]

And because this is the most twistable command of all, let's be clear what it does not mean. Loving your enemy doesn't mean pretending they haven't harmed you, or calling evil good, or dropping the demand that a real wrong be made right — mercy is never the abandonment of justice. It doesn't mean standing in harm's way or letting yourself be destroyed. And it doesn't mean lying down before evil — you can love your enemy and still resist their evil, fiercely and nonviolently, at the same time. What enemy-love refuses is not justice — it's hatred. It's refusing to let your enemy turn you into a mirror of themselves. Dr. King knew this to his bones — relentless for justice, and refusing on principle to hate the people he fought, because hatred would remake him into another version of them. You can burn for a world set right and love your enemy at the same time. If you want to stay human while you fight, you have to.

[The first step, and the practice.]

So where do you start with a command this high? Right where Jesus points — "pray for those who persecute you." You may not be able to summon one warm feeling — but you can pray for them, by name. And here's the mercy in it: it's almost impossible to keep hating someone you're genuinely praying for. Prayer for an enemy is a slow solvent, and the first thing it loosens is your own heart.

So here's our question this week — freedom for others, at its very peak: who's my enemy — the person or group I've filed under "them," outside the reach of my love? Two things to practice. First, pick one of them and pray for them by name, every day, for their real good — and watch what it does to you. Second, do one small concrete good toward someone you don't like or

who's wronged you. Hold the guardrails: this is your heart and small acts, not returning to danger or dropping a just cause. You can love an enemy, stay safe, and work for justice all at once.

Next time, Part Four — the Sermon turns from how we treat people to how we practice our devotion. "Beware of practicing your righteousness to be seen." Giving, prayer, fasting — and a familiar enemy: the hunger to be seen.

[Slow. Land it.]

For now, go and climb — one step at a time, up the highest road there is. Love the ones it makes no sense to love. Pray, by name, for the person you'd rather hate. And when it feels impossible — as it will — remember whose children you are: the sun that rose this morning on friend and enemy alike is your Father's, and he's only asking you to love the way he already loves you.

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Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.