



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 5:33–48

Gospel of Matthew

“Truths, Rights and Christian Love”

TRANSCRIPT

For the Scripture reading, will you turn with me to the last section of the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew? We are reading today verses 33 through 48 for our text. Matthew chapter 5 verse 33 through verse 48. Now, we have been looking at the antitheses that make up the latter part of Matthew chapter 5, in which our Lord contrasts the ethics of the king with the ethics of the scribal tradition. And we have looked at three of the six antitheses, and now we look at the last three, and they're introduced by the little word, “again,” which divides the six into two parts of three each. Beginning with verse 33, then, of Matthew chapter 5:

“Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatever is more than these cometh of evil. Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right

cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him two. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who spitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye should be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them who love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if ye greet your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the heathen so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.”

This morning, our subject, as we continue our exposition of the Gospel of Matthew is “Truth, Rights and Christian love.” Simon Cameron said, “An honest politician is one who, when bought, will stay bought.” [Laughter]

Disraeli said, “In politics, there is no honor,” and he also said again—being a politician himself, he should know—“in politics, nothing is contemptible.”

James Freeman Clark has said, “The difference between a politician and a statesman is, a politician thinks of the next election, and a statesman thinks of the next generation.” It would seem, at least, to an amateur observer that we do not have many statesmen today, although we have a great number of politicians.

Rights is another relevant subject in the light of our recent national history. The United States has just passed through a decade or more—two decades, to be exact—of discussion of the

question of rights: the rights of minorities, the rights of females, and other rights, no doubt.* What are Christians’ rights?

The answer of the Lord, I think, will surprise you, and the third subject is love. I think that every Christian believes that love is always a relevant subject. If there is one topic just by its very name of four letters that the Christian church has been able to communicate to the world, it is the little word, love. William Barkley has called love “a concentrated expression of the Christian ethic of personal relations.”

Of course, the world does not think of love in the sense that we think of love. The world does not relate love to the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The world does not ground its exhortations regarding love upon the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ. The love of which the world so often sings is a far cry from the kind of love that the Christians speak about.

The remarkable thing about our Lord’s words on love here is not so much that he uses the term “love.” But the remarkable thing is that he says, “love your enemies.” Now this does not seem to be very strange to us. We are the recipient of 2,000 years of Christian tradition. As a matter of fact, of course, we are the recipient of many thousands of years of biblical tradition, but I am speaking specifically of the tradition that comes from Jesus Christ. And therefore we often do not remember that the first person, who taught mankind to see in each man a neighbor, and therefore to treat everyman in love, is our Lord Jesus Christ. And this statement, “to love your enemies,” is absolutely unique.

Two of the greatest scholars in the study of the Hebraic and Judaistic backgrounds of the New Testament were H. L. Strack and Billerbeck. And these two individuals have written a series of volumes—they’ve never been translated up to this point—in which most of the information that has to do with the relationship between Judaism and Christianity is set forth (not all of it, but most of it). And in that particular book, Strack and Billerbeck have made that statement, “That it will therefore remain that the first person who has taught mankind to see in each man the neighbor, and therefore

*This series of messages on the Gospel of Matthew was preached during 1976.

to treat every man in love, is Jesus Christ himself.” Love your enemies, then, was something absolutely unique in our Lord’s day.

Now we want to look at these three antitheses that deal with truth, with rights and with Christian love. And the first of them has to do with Christian oaths in verse 33 through verse 37. That little word, “again,” as I said before the Scripture reading, is the word that divides the first three antitheses of the six from the last three. In these three antitheses, and in the sixth as a whole, the Lord Jesus is contrasting the teaching which he was bringing with the scribal and Pharisaic tradition. So we are to look at our Lord’s words as giving the distinctions which exist between his teaching and the teaching to which the disciples had been exposed up to this time.

Of course, there are some very practical applications of these words which the Lord Jesus has said. Thou shalt not perjure thyself, but thou shalt perform unto the Lord thy oaths—these things have to do with all of the promises we make ourselves, and all of those exalted promises that we often make in public meetings, in which we affirm that we shall give our Lord full surrender. All of these things are very practical ways in which the words of the Old Testament apply to us. But the Lord Jesus Christ’s teaching strikes out upon a different line.

He said, “You have heard it said by them of old, thou shalt not perjure thyself, but shall perform unto the Lord thine oaths.” So, the tradition affirmed no false swearing. And that, of course, is imminently correct, but tremendously abused in our Lord’s time. And so, when the lawgiver’s interpretation is given us in verse 34 through verse 37, we must look at his words in the light of the abuse of this biblical principle of no false swearing.

The Lord Jesus is not correcting the Old Testament itself. The Old Testament words stand. It is the false interpretations that had been put upon them that he wants to speak about. If, for example, we were to take his words in verse 34, “swear not at all,” and take them boldly by themselves, then of course we should have some serious problems, for in the Old Testament, believers are called upon to swear by the name of the Lord. And in the New Testament, we find the apostles themselves swearing. The Apostle Paul swears by the name of God.

Now of course, when we speak of swearing, we are not talking of the kind of swearing which we would better call profanity. We are talking about calling upon the name of God as witness to a human undertaking. And finally, if we should take this as an absolute prohibition, “swear not at all,” what shall we do about God himself, who often swears by his name? And one of the most famous of all of the taking of oaths is one which God himself has taken in connection with the Abrahamic covenant as it pertains to our Lord Jesus Christ.

We read, for example, in verse 17 of Hebrews chapter 6, “Wherein, God willing, more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolations who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope that is set before us, which hope we have as an anchor of the soul.” So it is God himself who in the Abrahamic covenant has sworn to keep his word.

Therefore, as we interpret these words, we must realize that the Lord Jesus Christ’s words were directed toward the abuses of the Old Testament or biblical prescriptions. In the time of our Lord, there were two types of practices that were deceptive. In the first place, there was a great deal of frivolous swearing, totally unnecessary swearing. Men were often saying, “By my life, such-and-such is true.” That was totally unnecessary, and consequently, our Lord’s words, “swear not at all” do have their application to that type of swearing.

But it is the evasive swearing that he has particularly in mind. You see, it was the belief of the peoples of those days, that if you called upon the name of God in an oath, then that undertaking must be carried out. But if you could evade the use of the name of God, and swear by Jerusalem, or swear by one’s head, or swear by the Temple, then oaths that were based upon these things were not as binding as the others. And so in this way, one might swear and not be held, totally, to his word. So, oaths with God’s name were binding, but others were not.

And the Lord Jesus speaks specifically with respect to that. He says, do not swear by heaven, for after all, heaven belongs to God. Swearing by heaven is the same as swearing by God. You

cannot make that distinction. Furthermore, do not swear by the earth, for the earth is the footstool of the Lord. Do not swear by Jerusalem, for the Old Testament makes it very plain that Jerusalem is the city of the great King.

I want you to notice something that I think is extremely important here. You’ll notice that the Lord Jesus, in seeking to answer these questions that have arisen concerning ethics, always goes to the Bible. Now these statements of his in which he says, “Do not swear by heaven, it is God’s throne; do not swear by the earth, for it’s his footstool; don’t swear by Jerusalem, for it’s the city of the great King”—these are statements that are taken from Holy Scripture. The Lord Jesus is arguing on the basis of Isaiah chapter 66 and verse 1 and of the other related passages. And I think this is most interesting because, you see, it illustrates for us the fact that when the Lord Jesus answers questions of ethics, it is the Bible that is for him authoritative. He always goes to Scripture. He does not say, “What is the latest opinion of the scholars who have to do with this particular subject?” It is always for him the scriptural Word. And I think this is most instructive for us and most important for us.

He did not deal with difficulties and answer things and direct questions by what people have said or by what others have thought, but always by what the old book, the Holy Scriptures have said. “Ye do err not knowing the Scriptures,” is his way of explaining our ignorance. It is not that we have not kept up with the latest thought upon some subject that is related to the Word of God, it is that we do not know Holy Scripture. I wish I could communicate this to you, for I think it is one of the most important principles found in the Word of God. And often, Christians rush hither, thither and yon, looking for answers to questions concerning life, when the first place that they should look is in Holy Scripture itself. He always goes to the Bible.

Essentially, the reason that this question arises is because men are liars. The reason that oaths are used is because we are liars. And, “an Englishman’s word is his bond” is a saying that only confirms that fact. We are liars, and the very fact that we must stand on the witness stand and raise

our hands—in some places, at least—and give testimony to the fact that this time we will tell the truth, is a testimony to the fact that we do not ordinarily tell the truth.

And the very fact that oaths have arisen is a testimony to the character of human nature. And it is our Lord himself who expresses it, I think, most beautifully of all the Scriptural writers and speakers, for he says, “If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts.”

A question, then, that arises as our Lord Jesus has swept away all oaths is, should a Christian take an oath in a law court? Now, Christians have differed over this. Tolstoy, a Russian professing Christian and master of literature, affirmed that one should never take an oath. The Anabaptists have, historically, never taken oaths. And as you well know, the Quakers have never taken oaths. The Quakers have always insisted that a man should speak the truth.

George Fox, who was the founder of the Quakers, has said that in his experience, “The only word that one needed to use was the word, ‘verily.’” Now, not all of the followers of George Fox were that truthful, as our recent national experience will show. But you can see, of course, that this is, in the light of the statement of our Lord, a question that might easily arise. I say unto you, swear not at all. And furthermore, James, in the 5th chapter of his epistle says much the same thing, evidently having learned that from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Should a Christian take an oath in a law court? I’m not sure that it is as important as a lot of people like to make of it. They like to think that there is some contradiction between Scripture and what many Christians do. I only offer an opinion. It seems to me that what our Lord Jesus is speaking about is the taking of private oaths, and that we are to understand this passage, as well as the passage in James chapter 5, by the illustrations that are given. And the illustrations that are given in both of these contexts have to do with private oaths. And therefore, I would personally not think that it would be wrong for a Christian to take an oath in a law court. But, Christians have differed over this, and you will have to make up your mind over that question.

The important thing is the statement our Lord makes in the last verse of the section when he says, “But let your communication be yea yea, nay nay; for whatever is more than these cometh of

evil.” In other words, the Christian’s words are to be absolutely truthful. He should be characterized by forthrightness in all of his speech. Let your communication be yea yea, and nay nay.

In a year in which we will be exposed to a great deal of bombast over our TV screens and over the radios, it would form a very effective contrast if Christians could come to be known as men and women of their word, for we must always remember that we speak in the presence of God. And so the answers that we make, and the practice that we follow, in this year of all years, could form a beautiful testimony to the truthfulness that the Lord Jesus inculcates upon all his disciples.

The next question that arises is the question of retaliation. This is the famous *lex talionis*, or the law of retaliation. It’s the law of tit for tat, traceable throughout ancient legal codes, even over 2,000 years before the coming of Christ to the Code of Hammurabi. The social structure could not hold together without the law of retaliation. “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil.”

This teaching is biblical: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It was biblical and expressed very plainly in the Old Testament. I’m going to read a passage or two in which we find this. Exodus chapter 21 verse 23 through verse 25. This is the passage that our Lord refers to. We read, Exodus chapter 21 and verse 23:

“And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

Now, let’s turn over to Leviticus chapter 24 and verse 17 through verse 21. We again have a passage that refers to that which our Lord is speaking about. Leviticus chapter 24 verse 17 through verse 21:

“And he that killeth any man shall surely be put to death. And he that

killeth a beast shall make it good; beast for beast. And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbour; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again. And he that killeth a beast, he shall restore it: and he that killeth a man, he shall be put to death.”

This teaching is biblical. It's not cruel. It's merciful.

The reason that this kind of teaching was given is because in the earliest history of the human race, there were frequently private vendettas and also feuds. And even in the recent history of the human race there have been feuds. The Campbells, and the MacDonalds—we all know about. The reason that this teaching in the Bible was given is because God was merciful, and it was a very, very useful thing for Israel to be placed under this. But unfortunately in the time of our Lord, this too had become misunderstood by the scribes, and so the Lord Jesus had attacked the scribal understanding of this ancient Old Testament principle upon which the very fabric of the society was built.

Incidentally, we are living in the days in which these ancient principles which have pervaded our society are being questioned. And not only being questioned, but being discarded. And a great deal of the foment that exists in our society and the Western world is the result of the abandonment of these basic principles of biblical teaching.

Now the Lord Jesus Christ's interpretation is very simple: “I say unto you that ye resist not evil.” Those passages that were referred to were passages that referred to laws for civil courts. And so as is characteristic of our Lord, he goes beyond that and he enunciates for Christians non-retaliation for personal wrongs—that's a very important principle—non-retaliation for personal wrongs. Now let me give you an illustration.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul applies this teaching—I don’t think he does it directly—but as I understand it, it is a legitimate application of it. He applies this teaching to the question of Christians going to law. Christians are not to go to law with one another. I know right at the present time of several cases of Christians who are suing one another in law. Now, the Apostle Paul applies this to those cases of personal wrong; non-retaliation for personal wrongs is the teaching of our Lord, and it is the teaching of the Apostle Paul.

And in order to illustrate his point, he gives four illustrations. And I said, as I began the message this morning, our Lord’s words concerning our rights are very significant. And his answer is, essentially, we Christians—we have no rights. Listen to what he says. “I say unto you that ye resist not evil, for whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” In the case of personal assault, we have no rights.

I don’t know whether you’ve ever tried to smite anybody on the right cheek with your right hand or not, but you might leave, having tried it, with a very bad back condition. You can see the kind of smiting he’s speaking about is not the kind of smiting by which, with a right cross, you land a hard blow on your opponent’s jaw, but he’s speaking about the kind of attack by which you take the back of your hand and smite the right of the jaw of the person in front of you.

Now that tells us a great deal about the type of blow that our Lord Jesus is referring to, because that was the most insulting blow of all. And even in modern societies we have had this sort of thing when a man takes off his glove and insults his opponent by bringing it across the right cheek, and that of course, was the sign that I want to meet you at 5 o’clock in the morning, and you chose the weapons. So, if a man shall smite thee on the right cheek, the Lord Jesus says, turn to him the other also.

I heard about one person who, when he was smitten by an opponent of his—an enemy of his—turned to him the other cheek. And then after that person had smitten him again on the other cheek, he said, “Now the Bible doesn’t say a thing about what I shall do after the second one

[laughter],” and with that he flattened him with a good right cross. [Laughter] I don’t really think that that is what the Lord Jesus had in mind here.

What he had in mind, essentially, is no retaliation at all. I have in the notes this morning an illustration that Guy King tells of the eccentric Methodist preacher Billy Bray, in which Billy Bray evidently had given quite a good testimony to his Christian faith. And one of his fellow miners, who was very much upset over what had happened to Billy, finally, one day in sheer annoyance, struck him on the face, saying, “Take that for turning Methody!”

And Billy turned and looked at him and said, “May God forgive you, man, for I do.” Mr. King says that was turning the other cheek, and it was not long afterwards that that man came to faith in the Lord Jesus.

Is this something that is to be done literally? Well, I think, of course, that if there were literal cases like this, it should be done literally. But we have a very interesting illustration of our Lord Jesus himself in the New Testament, in which something like this happens, and in the case of our Lord Jesus, there is not a carrying out of this in most literal fashion. In John chapter 18 we read, in verse 22, “And when he had thus spoken, one of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, ‘Answerest thou our high priest so?’ And our Lord did not turn the other check so far as the text is concerned, but he did say, ‘If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil, but if well, why smitest thou me?’ So, evidently, the principle is the important thing, and it is non-retaliation for personal wrongs. That’s the first principle.

The Apostle Paul has, incidentally, a word to say about this, too. He evidently knows this tradition, because in the 12th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, the 19th through the 21st verses, he speaks of the application of it in principle, too, for he writes, “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay,’ sayeth the Lord. Therefore, if mine enemy hunger, feed him. If he thirst, give him drink. For in so doing, thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Resist not evil.

Now this, of course, does not intend to give the impression that we should not be opposed to evil things. But this is the law of non-retaliation for personal wrongs for us. All Christians, of course, should always stand upon the side of justice and right. But this is personal wrong, the Lord is speaking about.

Then he is speaking, secondly, about the law courts. He says, “And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.” Ancient people who lived in the east, from Rome all the way over to Palestine, generally had two garments. They had an inner garment, and then they had one large, heavy outer garment which was the cloak. They wore a tunic, and then they wore a coat.

And that coat was so important to them that if a person borrowed money on his coat, the person from whom he borrowed money had to return the coat to him every night in order that he might use it for his covering. That was not only the coat that he wore, it was his blanket also. And, by virtue of the mercy and kindness that is found in the law of Moses, the man who lent the money had to return that garment which was a pledge for the loan that was made.

Now here we read, the Lord Jesus is saying, that if someone sues thee at the law and takes away your coat, let him have your cloak, also. Even if the law protects us, we are not to live by the right of possession. By the way, this does not mean that one must live by this when some non-Christian discovers these Christian principles and decides that he will prey on Christians as a result of them. They're many people who stand on street corners begging, who know these principles. They will stand on certain corners where they know that they will have some people come by who are disposed to give to them. That is not the thing that the Lord is speaking about, but he is speaking about the genuine things that happen.

The third illustration is an illustration that's not one that is simply made up for the sake of being made up—not any of these are. They're all true to the life of the time of our Lord. If any man will sue thee—that's the third illustration—then the third, “And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him two.”

The Palestinians lived in an occupied country. It was very frequently the case that a Roman, standing in his official uniform, would take his spear and tap a Hebrew on the shoulder and say, “Pick up that baggage and carry it to such-and-such a place.” We have an illustration of this when Simon of Cyrene was impressed into service and made to carry the cross of Jesus. This text was a text that would have applied to him had he, at this time, known it. If whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him two.

T. W. Manson made the comment, “That we are to render to Caesar things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s, and to go one mile with the Roman was to render to Caesar the things that were Caesar’s and to go an additional mile was to render to God the things that were God’s.” So, the Lord Jesus says, whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him two. Non-retaliation in personal wrongs.

And finally, “Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.” And here in the financial help, Christians are called upon to give generously, give magnanimously, to give as Barnabas gave and not as Ananias and Sapphira gave.

The Rabbis, incidentally, had five principles which were designed to govern giving. Giving must not be refused. To refuse to give is in the same category as being an idolater, for it was to fail to recognize God.

Giving must befit the man to whom it is given. He must not be given just a bare sufficiency, but you should give him sufficient for him to retain the standard of living to which he was accustomed. Amazing thing.

Third, giving must be done privately and secretly, so when the offering plates were passed in church, one was not to pull out a \$20 bill and wave it in the air and put it in the plate [laughter].

The manner of giving must befit the character and temperament of the recipient. A gift to a miser could be reclaimed from his estate afterwards. But, for a generous man, for that kind of man who was too proud to ask for a loan, one was to come and to offer a loan, and a then it was not to be repaid.

And giving, finally, was a privilege and an obligation, for all giving is nothing less than giving to God. Those are great principles. They are inadequate.

They are not the Christian principles of giving. The Christian principle of giving is not the tithe. The tithe was something like an income tax; everybody had to give a tenth. Do not think for one moment that the tithe was a gift. It was something that was demanded. Giving was over and above the tithe. That's why the Old Testament speaks of tithes and offerings.

And while, of course, it is true that if, in the Old Testament, men did have to give the tithe, one would expect Christians to give generously. But strictly speaking, the Christian principles of giving are giving as God has prospered you. Giving freely. Giving out of gratitude. It may be 5%, 2%, 8%, 10%, 15%, 25%, or it may even be that you should give as John Wesley gave. He decided at the beginning of the year how much money he needed to live that year, and everything else beyond that was given to the work of the ministry of the gospel, and it was often large sums of money that John Wesley gave. Giving in Christian giving is giving out of gratitude for that which Jesus Christ has done.

Many years ago, I sat down at the table accidentally with a man who was a member of the Wells Organization, which was an organization that was devoted to the managing of programs of giving in local churches. We sat down, accidentally, at the same table; a mutual friend was sitting with me.

This man sat down, and when I asked him what he did, he told me he was with the Wells Organization which was organizing programs for giving in churches. [And] since we had just been exposed to one in Charleston, South Carolina in our family, I was interested in what he had to say. I said, “What are your principles?” (He should have never sat down with me at the table [laughter]). But I asked him what his principles were.

He said, “Well, the first thing we do is we get the membership roll, and we go down the roll, and we look at the citizens, and then we investigate their financial standing. And after we've investigated the financial standing, then we pick out several men who have not been giving to the

organization, because we know that if we ask them to become leaders in the campaign to give, they will give, and that will be additional giving. And so we generally have as the chairman of the stewardship campaign someone who has not been giving very much.”

Well, I listened to the exposition of all of his principles and finally I said to him as the conversation came nearly to the end, “By the way, have you ever used this principle of giving because of gratitude for that which Jesus Christ has done for us?”

And he was a very simple man and listened very plainly and intently to what I was saying, and so I just launched into a discussion of the gospel of Christ and the cross of Christ, and what it should mean to a person to give out of gratitude, for that’s what Jesus Christ had done. And when I finished I said, have you ever used that principle?

And he said, “No, to tell you the truth, we’ve never used that principle, but that’s not such a bad idea after all.” [Laughter]

Christian giving, out of gratitude for that which Jesus Christ has done. It has really pleased me—I’m speaking as an elder, and also as a member of Believers Chapel—it has really pleased me that the giving in Believers Chapel has always been generous and magnanimous and full. And it seems to me that has been a testimony to the reality of the possession of the gospel of Christ in the audiences and in the membership. And as you well know, we have never appealed for funds, and we shall never appeal for funds as long as the present elders are here. They do not believe in that, but they believe very strongly in giving as God has prospered us, and out of gratitude for that which Jesus Christ has done. We are thankful. I think it is a condition that reflects some of the health of the spiritual condition of the members of Believers Chapel.

The final question is one that I think we can handle rather briefly, because it is probably the best known of all the statements that our Lord makes. “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thy enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies.” Claude Montefiore, who was a Jewish man, has said that this is the central and most famous section of the

Sermon on the Mount. The law is plain: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” But tradition had altered this word in three particulars.

The tradition had said, love thy neighbor as thyself, but by the time of our Lord, the word “neighbor” had been qualified to mean the Israelites. The Gentiles were excluded. And furthermore, the love thy neighbor as thyself had come to be omitted. Those little words “as thyself” were no longer part of the tradition. And finally, the addition of the words, “hate thine enemy,” are not found in the Old Testament at all. Bengel called that, “That detestable gloss.”

And our Lord refers to it. You have heard that it hath been taught you, Thou shalt love thy neighbour—love the Israelites; don’t love them as yourself, but love the Israelites—and hate the Gentiles. But I say unto you, Love your enemies. And furthermore, he adds, “That ye may be the sons of your Father who is heaven.”

Evidently, this is not to be understood, of course, obviously, it’s not to be understood that we are to become the sons of God by loving. But what he is saying is, when we love our enemies we reveal the kinds of persons that we are. It is in the loving of enemies that we show ourselves to be sons of God. For in that, it becomes evident that the sons possess the same characteristics that the Father possesses.

Now you can tell the members of some families possess the same characteristics that the father possesses. Now you can tell the members of some family not simply by looking upon their outward countenance and seeing how they resemble their father or their mother, but you can often tell them by their characteristics.

You can tell them, for example, that they are polite, when their father and mother are polite. You can tell them by the fact that they are a gentleman when their father is a gentleman. You can tell them by their personal habits, when they dress like their parents for certain occasions in which one should dress properly, they dress properly. You can tell them by their likeness to their father.

That’s what our Lord is talking about. He says, “That ye should be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth

rain on the just and on the unjust.” If Christians only love their friends, they would not be like their Father in heaven. He sends his rain on the just and the unjust. Love your enemies, the Lord Jesus said. “If ye love them who love you, what reward have ye? Don’t the tax-collectors do the same? If ye greet your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the heathen so? Be ye therefore mature.”

Incidentally, that word perfect—I wish I had time to speak about that—it really is a word that means something like perfection or maturity or if something realizes its intended purpose. And evidently, it pertains to the love that has just been previously mentioned in the context. Be mature in your love, even as the Father is mature in his love. And that love is the love of Christian love.

Incidentally, this word love in the New Testament, whenever you run across that word, almost always in the context you will find some reference to the cross.

Well, our time is up. We must stop. Truth, rights, love, can only be seen under the light of the penetrating words of our Lord Jesus. We speak in God’s presence. Our words should be yea yea, nay nay. We have no rights—even our property is not our property. It is a trust from God. And our love is as broad as the world, although specially directed toward those who belong to him.

Who can do these things? Who can possibly do these things? And how can we, of all people, live up to them? We, of whom the Lord Jesus said, “If ye, then being evil”? Only the liberating power of the Holy Spirit can enable us to live up to the things that our Lord Jesus sets forth in this Sermon on the Mount.

The Apostle Paul writes, “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” One of the greatest things in Holy Scripture is the realization that God, the Holy Spirit, who brought me to himself in sovereign grace when I hated him, continues his work through the sanctifying Holy Spirit’s ministry. And it is only through him that we can possibly measure up to these great statements the Lord Jesus has made.

A story is told of a girl who was sure that she could climb a certain mountain. By and by, as the road steepened, and the path narrowed, she sat down exhausted. And then came her father, with

his supporting arm to help her to the top. The author who told this said this is a parable. We are not left to climb that mountain alone. It's a great thing to be a Christian, and have the enabling power of the Holy Spirit of God. Shall we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, so beautifully illustrated in the cry from the cross, “My God my God, why has Thou forsaken me?”; the love of God the Father, who gave the Son; the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit, who accomplishes the purposes of the Godhead, be and abide with all who know him in sincerity.

And O Father, if there be some here who have not come to know him, wilt Thou give no rest nor peace until they rest in Christ.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.