

## THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL LOVE (Matthew 5:43-48)

1.31.21

### INTRODUCTION

I had something a bit different happen to me last Sunday. Just as I was finishing my message, I became very conscious that I was being poked and prodded - spiritually, inside. As I prayed about it later through the day, I realized that it was God - the Boss - poking me, basically saying, "You're not done with that message yet; I have more for you to say." And as I continued to pray, he began leading me into a deeper place of both teaching and challenge for all of us, starting with me. So, today's message is in response to that leading. Now admittedly, today may sound at times like a rerun of things we've already talked about but, as I have been digging, God has shown me so much more that is necessary for Him to say and for us to hear. In fact, this whole week has been an adventure as God has been leading me to some very important things, I believe He wants us all to embrace - as a body of believers, and as individuals. So, as we begin this adventure of digging deeper into His word, let's start it off **with a word of prayer.**

### TEXT AND ANALYSIS

So, where to start? You know, when a doctor meets somebody with a complaint about a health issue, they look at what symptoms that person is presenting. The symptoms help bring the doctor down a path that leads to diagnosis and, hopefully, cure. So, in terms of today's message, who's our sick patient? It's the world. And it's alongside that sick patient that our God has placed us.

How can we know that? Well, just for a moment, let's go back to how Christ structured what we've studied so far, these last few weeks in His Sermon on the Mount, keeping in mind that He is speaking to believers. First, He points out the character traits of citizens of the Kingdom - the Beatitudes. Then He talks about how, reflecting those attitudes, we are to be making an impact to all those around us - referring to that impact as "salt" and "light."

But look at how Christ does this: He introduces each of those basic pictures - salt and light - with a simple, two-word phrase: You are: "***You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world***" - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:13a, 14a***. No requirements of qualifications, schooling, age, experience. And no degree of future hope or expectation, such as "you might be" or "you could be" or "eventually you will be." **You are** is present tense! Folks, **you are** is now! And Jesus says this in a way that leaves no room for equivocation or misunderstanding - **you are**. If you are a believer, a surrendered life to God the Father through Jesus Christ the Son, that's the drill, now and for the rest of your life - Christ is very literally telling us today as clearly as that crowd in Galilee 2,000 years ago: "**You are** salt and light. Before you are anything else, you are salt and light, My salt and light, to the world!"

That is a profound statement that we as Christians need to not just understand but, more importantly, claim and embrace. It's quite a difference to say, "I am a farmer or a lawyer or a dentist or a teacher who also happens to be a Christian, and to say, "I am a Christian who happens to bear witness to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by being a farmer or a lawyer or a dentist or a teacher" - or whatever. Seeing ourselves as salt and light before we see ourselves in any other way is one of the most critical understandings to which we can come - as

individual Christians and as a body of believers. To apply that reality to every component of our lives is crucial to fulfilling Christ's plans for His church.

It is also incredibly important for clarifying our place in all of what Christ is doing in the world - in other words, understanding ourselves as citizens of the Kingdom of God in the service of the King. To put it in military terms, we are temporarily "stationed" here in this culture with its trends or politics or whatever, but we exist here, as Peter so colorfully described it, as *strangers and pilgrims* - *1 Peter 2:11a*. The idea of "pilgrim" in the Greek is of one traveling in a strange place, away from one's own people, which would certainly be appropriate if, as Paul wrote (and I love how the New Century Version phrases it), *our homeland is in heaven* - *Paul, Philippians 3:20a (NCV)*. The Kingdom is what defines us; the Kingdom is what molds us and makes us.

So, what does that mean for our being here? Well, we're here, at this time and place because God desired us to be here. It's no accident - being alive now, living in the United States now, residing in Redwood Falls, Minnesota now. It is all a part of God's placing His citizens where they can best serve the Kingdom. But while we are in this world, even as strangers and pilgrims, we need to connect to this world - to know what and how people are thinking - their hopes, dreams, fears, anxieties - to initiate relationships with them that we might minister to them, witness to them and disciple them, all in coming alongside them on their own journey to the Kingdom. And that brings us to the words of Christ that God has been redirecting me to:

***"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:43.***

Jesus quotes from the book of Leviticus as He reminds them of the Scripture that says to *love your neighbor*. Now love, particularly in the context of Jesus saying it, is used to describe the love His followers are to have for one another and for all people in general. It is an exercise of the will in deliberate choice, made for no reason other than to reflect the love and nature of God Himself. Christian love is not driven by feelings, nor does it spend itself only on those who like us or who are like us. Biblical agape love seeks the best for everybody and, contrary to the world's desire to attack and do harm to somebody they don't like in a "zero-sum" game where there are only winners or losers, followers of Jesus Christ proactively seek opportunity to do good to everyone that crosses their path - all in service to their Master.

Now God said through Moses to love our neighbor - literally, "the one near." Now back in biblical times, there were no farms scattered far and wide as we see right around us today. People lived in villages, leaving to work the fields, and then returning. Neighbors were literally an immediate constant for rural people. Neighbors were crucial to people's lives, so maintaining good relationships was incredibly important.

God Himself then expanded the idea of "neighbor" beyond those immediate village relationships. He said later in that same chapter in Leviticus: ***"The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God"*** - *God speaking, Leviticus 19:34*. In other words, God directs the Israelites to treat the foreigners living among them as if they were fellow Israelites, showing them the same level of love. Why? God wants them to never forget that they themselves were once foreigners while in Egypt. God wants them to never forget what being a

foreigner in Egypt meant for them, what that felt like - and then to use those memories to inform their relationships with others.

Of course, during His ministry, Christ would clarify (through the parable of the "Good Samaritan" - Luke 10:25-37) that a "neighbor" includes everybody, including somebody you don't know personally - even somebody with whom you would not normally associate. And I suspect Jesus was awfully serious about this; in John He phrased "love" as a command - as words to be obeyed: ***"A new command I give you: Love one another.*** [And just for clarity, what does obeying that command look like?] ***As I have loved you, so you must love one another"*** - ***Jesus Christ, John 13:34.*** "Jesus" is what that commandment looks like. Jesus is the model for how to love. And who was His model? The Father, with words describing that love that were read to us earlier; listen to some of the words and phrases that were used:

Compassionate

Gracious

Slow to anger

Abounding in love

Does not treat us as our sins deserve

Does not repay us according to our iniquities

Infinitely great love

Infinitely great forgiveness.

That's the model the Father gave Jesus, that Jesus in turn gave to us, and that we are to give to the world.

Now, moving on in our text, the Greek defines "hate" as "to detest (specially to persecute); malicious and unjustifiable feelings toward others, whether towards the innocent or by mutual animosity." An "enemy," of course, would be an adversary, foe, one (often) hatefully set or opposed to you - meaning opposed to who you are, how you are, and for what you stand for. Now, as we mentioned last week, the idea of "hate your enemy" would be an example of a tradition that had grown up over time, gradually, through repeated teaching and reference, to have come to be seen on a par with Scripture.

Jesus' response? No: ***"I tell you, love your enemies and pray for [bless] those who persecute [curse] you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"*** - ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:44-48.***

What's especially significant here is that the Greek confirms that Jesus is using the same word when saying, "Love your enemies" as He uses saying, "Love your neighbor." And His adding that in doing such things "you maybe children of your Father in heaven" goes back to the idea that children resemble and reflect their parents. Here it is our actions and our attitudes that are called upon to resemble and reflect the Father - as well as the Son.

Which means that, when others "trash-talk" us, we bless them in response by praising them

and speaking good of them. When others wish us only harm, we pray for them. Therefore, we tailor our responses to the way Christ responded, according to Peter: ***[I]f you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth." When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly - I Peter 2:20b-23 (quoting Isaiah 53:9).***

And as Christ points out, His Father, against whom all sin is committed, treats all on earth equally - sunshine on all, rain on all. And anyone can love those who love them; pretty much everybody does that. But the greatest reflection of the Father is loving all regardless of how they treat us. So, if circumstances call for us to turn the other cheek, to give more than necessary, to go the extra mile, we do it to reflect the perfect Father who is working to perfect us.

## **APPLICATION**

Now last week, I ended my message with a list of some of our culture's redefinitions of many things that Christianity and the Scriptures hold most dear - things like how the culture has redefined life, love, marriage and family. Now, at first blush, it might appear that those who support these, and other issues are our enemies. Folks, we don't have enemies. Nonbelievers may see us as their enemies, but we can't see them the same way. As Paul reminds us: ***[O]ur struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms - Paul, Ephesians 6:12.*** We are not to treat nonbelievers as enemies any more than the doctor treats a patient as an enemy. The doctor's enemy is the disease attacking the patient. Sin is all around us, but what we see are symptoms; the victims are people Satan has deceived. Satan is our enemy; he is the power behind all the sin and corruption that we see on display every day. Christ called Satan ***"a liar and the father of lies" - Jesus Christ, John 8:44*** - and for good reason: It is his lies about God and about God's intentions that have led people so far astray. God's restrictions are about His love for us, to be guides that give our lives the greatest joys possible - joys that would lead us to fall on our knees in praise to His name!

Last week during our "Soul Miners" Bible study, one of the participants noted that, what discouraged that person was the seemingly passive response by Christians to these and many other cultural issues that reflect a world spiritually "dead in the water." That person commented that what seemed to be seen in other religions was a much more passionate response to things seen as sin in their world. Well, it's not like we don't know how to be passionate. I for one saw in last November's elections that we absolutely know how to get fired up about something near and dear to our hearts. Folks, salvation for the people around us is something to be fired up about. People dying outside the Kingdom is something to be fired up about. And so, while that reaching out and making a difference in this world might seem like an overwhelming task - to make "noise" for Christ within a world that wants nothing more than for Christians to just shut up and go away - the fact is that, however big the world may seem, we're working for the One who created the world, and who continues to hold that whole great big world in His perfect hands. God is bigger - than anything. So, let's get excited: How can we impact this world for the Kingdom of Heaven? How do we attack the disease?

Some suggestions:

First, pray. Get in line with the Savior who died for this world, for the Holy Spirit who prays for this world, and for the Almighty God *who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth - Paul, I Timothy 2:4*, who is *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance - II Peter 3:9b*. Remember that, just before His arrest, Jesus was praying - not for Himself, but for His disciples and, as He says: *"I pray also for those who will believe in Me through [His disciples'] message" - Jesus Christ, John 17:20b*.

And remember that, just as God wanted the Israelites' love for foreigners to be driven by their own memories of what being a foreigner had meant for them, so also God wants our prayers and passions for the unsaved to be driven by our own memories of our lives; as Paul wrote, *[R]emember that at that time you were separate from Christ ... and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ - Paul, Ephesians 2:12-13*. We pray for God's grace and mercy for others as a worship and response to God's grace and mercy to us. So we need to see others outside of Christ as God once saw us - and saved us even as we were *God's enemies - Paul, Romans 5:10a*.

Second, look for opportunities to bear witness. Ask that God would open your eyes to the people and circumstances right around you. Peter told us to be prepared for these chances; he said: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have - I Peter 3:15a*. But don't forget to claim what else Peter told us: *[God's] divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature - II Peter 1:3-4a*. And as Jesus Himself assured us: *"[D]o not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 10:19-20*.

Three, write letters. This isn't verbal witnessing, but it is just as much witnessing - to somebody I may never actually meet. Actually, any kind of communication can be useful, but letters have the advantage of being able to be referred to again. Spell out your concerns for policies with which you, on the basis of Scripture, disagree. For instance, I know that one of President Biden's campaign promises was to ensure the ongoing availability of abortion rights in this country. As a former fetus, I object. But if I write my letter to him (and also to Kamala Harris, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer, just to name a few) just on the basis of "I disagree" or "I think you're wrong," that will mean nothing. But if I present it on the basis of Scripture, including actually placing verses in my letter to make God's point, that plants a seed. Now I know a friend of mine told me, "They'll never read it." Maybe - but somebody in their office might. And I can pray that they read it. Either way, a seed gets planted, and now the Holy Spirit can go to work with that seed. And I can continue to pray for those letters, that somehow by God's grace and mercy they find an audience.

You know, for all the times we fuss about the direction of the nation, what better way to impact that direction than by praying for our leaders and witnessing through Scripture to our

leaders. That's something we need to get excited about, to be passionate about. President Biden is a devout Catholic; that allows me to challenge him on if his faith is simply to the things he agrees with in Catholic doctrine or, because Catholics also believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, the verses I share ring true for him as well. And continue to pray for his conclusions, as well as anybody else I write to.

## **CONCLUSION**

Folks, I don't know where things are headed in our country. There may actually come a time in America where Christians are persecuted for beliefs that run contrary to the culture in which we live. For instance, I don't see our church as a public space but rather as a "holy space," dedicated to the ministry of the gospel. If the Equality Act, already passed by the House, which seeks to add one's self-identifying gender to legal protections for things like race, and to which President Biden has pledged to sign, if that becomes law, I would conceivably be in violation for not allowing a male who identifies as female to use our female restrooms. I guess I'm going to be in violation of law then. And if laws are passed that prohibit me as a minister of the gospel to speak the truth concerning any sin, including sexual sin, then I guess I'll be in violation of those laws, too. But those laws are not who I answer to:

***"Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, make your own judgment; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard ... We must obey God rather than men" - Acts 4:19-20, 5:29 (NASB2020).***

In the meantime, there is a struggle going on in this world for the hearts and lives of so many around us. We have the privilege of being a part of that struggle, standing in the strength of God against the desires of our culture, participating in that struggle backed by the greatest power in the universe: God Himself. And "spoiler alert," at the risk of giving it all away, "God wins!" The moment Jesus uttered, "It is finished" before dying on the cross for our sins, God won. So, let's live lives that season the world around us with the life-changing salt of the gospel. And let's "plug in" to be a light to this sin-darkened world. Let's serve the Master in a battle we cannot lose against an evil that will never win. Let's pray!