A Perfect Love

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"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' **44** But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** 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 on the unrighteous. **46** For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? **47** And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? **48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

1. 9/11 Anniversary

Last week, we remembered the 17 years since the 9/11 terror attacks. The attacks remain one of the most shocking and impacting events in history. During that time, our family lived in Virginia, not far from the Pentagon. I can remember the frustration and anger of the people near us. 2,977 people were killed along with the 19 hijackers. Over 6,000 people were injured. And the attacks are estimated to cost over $10 billion in infrastructure and property damage.

Last Tuesday thousands of 9/11 victims' relatives, survivors, rescuers and others gathered at the memorial plaza where the World Trade Center's twin towers once stood. As we remember the lost, we ask ourselves how can we bring healing and hope in America? What have we learned as a country and how as followers of Christ are we able to share and comfort the families of those lost? What would Jesus have us do in these situations as his followers?

2. Love for Enemies

Today's scripture is part of Jesus' sermon on the mountain. Jesus says, "***You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you***."

Why does Jesus say this? It is because the Pharisees taught the Jews that they should love whom they love and hate their enemies. Such teaching is from Leviticus 19:18, "***You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*** The people of Israel were taught not to retaliate against a neighbor, but to show love.

Does the Bible say "***hate your enemy***"? Yes, it does. Psalm 139:21-22 say, ***"Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? … I hate them with***

perfect hatred; I count them my enemies." The people of Israel hated the Romans who had occupied the region. Why then would Jesus tell them to love their enemies?

The reason is that God loves all people, not only our friends but also our enemies. Jesus says, "***he (God) makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous***" (verse 45). God's love extends to everyone. As such, God directs Israel to show the same love to others. What difference is there between God's people and non-believers if we can only love the people we like. The passage explains that even the tax collectors and the Gentiles love their neighbors.

In verse 48, Jesus concludes his sermon on the mount by saying, "***Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.***" Jesus encourages his disciples and followers to extend love towards the "enemy." Just as God sends rain on the just and the unjust, so must Jesus' followers treat everyone the same as God treats everyone without discrimination.

3. Be Perfect

What does Jesus mean when he says "be perfect" as God is perfect? The Greek word for perfect is ***teleios.*** This word is translated here "perfect." However, it also means "end, goal, complete, and mature." Here this word is used in a very special way. The Greek idea of perfection is functional. If a thing fully realizes the purpose for which it was planned and designed, it is perfect. If a man realizes the purpose for which he was created and sent into the world, he is perfect. Genesis 1:26 says, "***Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness***." Humanity is created to be like God. The great characteristic of God is to love everyone. If a man cares for other human beings, the man is perfect.

The parallel passage in Luke's Gospel 6:36 says, "***Be merciful just as your Father is merciful***." "Merciful" in Greek means "to pity" or "have compassion on." God's mercy is illustrated every year on the day of Atonement (Yom Kippur, Leviticus 23:26-32), when the high priest enters the Holiest Place and sprinkles the blood of the sacrifice before the mercy seat (Leviticus 16:14).

God's mercy is revealed to us in his forgiveness through Jesus Christ. And the mercy of Jesus is found when he prays on the cross, ***"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."*** Instead of hating and cursing those who crucify him, Jesus asks for the forgiveness of their sin. God and Jesus' mercy and their forgiveness come from their love. God's forgiveness shows his love. God does not discriminate anyone in favor of the believers. God expects his children to do the same. Can we love others as God loves us? The love in the Bible means a sacrificial love. God's love is a perfect love. God expects his children to be like him.

4. Two Historic Questions

Did you know, the United Methodist Church bishop asks two questions as part of the ordination for elders and deacons. The first is, “Are you going on to perfection?” The second is, “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” The answer to these questions is yes.

These questions originate from the early Methodist movement. John Wesley explains salvation by two components, justifying grace and sanctifying grace. Through justifying grace, we are forgiven our sin and restored the relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

John Wesley did not believe that is everything that encompasses salvation. Wesley believed that God’s sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which he describes as a heart “habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor” and as “having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked.”

Sanctifying grace is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit that changes us so that our lives are increasingly conformed to the mind of Christ. John Wesley calls this lifelong process sanctification or becoming “perfection in love.” This call to Christian perfection is not in the sense of gaining perfection on our own strength, but in the sense that in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. When we become perfection in love, people would see Jesus in us.

5. Conclusion

Last week, Tropical Hurricane Florence stormed through North and South Carolina. The storm caused flooding in both states. Some towns received more than 2 feet of rain with forecasters estimating up to 3.5 feet of rain by the end of the storm. 21 (10 in NC and 11 in SC) people died in the storm and 930,000 homes and businesses remain without power.

There are many questions that come up in these situations. Some might ask, did God not love the people and therefore cause the storm to happen? Even in these situations, we know that God loves all people and that his love extends to everyone. Bad things happen to everyone.

In Jesus’ time, the Israelites considered the Romans and the Roman tax collectors as enemies. Jesus teaches the Israelites to love their neighbors and their enemies, the Romans and tax collectors.

To emphasize the point, Jesus says, “***if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*** [47] ***And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same***?” (verses 46-47) Jesus reminds his disciples that they are called to do more than Gentiles and tax collectors because they are God’s people and his followers.

6. Application

The day after the 9/11 terror attacks, the Chicago Tribune wrote on the front page, “Our nation saw evil” & “President promises to avenge lost lives.” I am sure many Americans felt the same way the president felt. But as followers of Jesus, we are put in a dilemma because the Bible teaches us not to take revenge.

In Romans 12:19, St. Paul says, citing Deuteronomy 32:35, “***Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord***.” In the New Testament, 1 Peter 3:9 also says, ***“Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.”***

Jesus tells his disciples and his followers, “***pray for those who persecute you”*** (Matthew 5:44). And St. Peter says***, “repay with a blessing.***” What do we have to do with our enemies? The answer seems to be found in Ephesians 4:31-32, ***“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, 32 and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”*** Can we let God take care of vengeance? Yes, we can. But it would not be easy to follow. When we let the Holy Spirit control our life, we can love our enemies.

About 70 years ago, there was a pastor in Korea. His name is Sohn Yang Won. He was serving a church for the lepers. In 1948 a gang of communist kids went to pastor Sohn’s house and taunted his son for being friends with an American soldier. His son came out to defend himself followed by his younger brother. But they were overpowered by the gang and beaten. Finally the brothers were killed. When pastor Sohn found out about the arrest of the murderer he sent word that he did not want him in jail. Instead the pastor adopted the murderer as his son because pastor Sohn wanted to follow what Jesus says in Matthew chapter 5, “love your enemy.”

Why do you think Jesus asks us to love our enemies? Look at this picture. It says, “love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend.” We should not forget the 9/11 attacks. However, if we want that this terrible event would never happen again, the hearts of enemies must be filled with God’s love. How can that happen?

As people of God and followers of Christ, we should show God’s love and the mercy of Christ in our lives. As Christians, we are charged to move towards the perfect love of Jesus that we have experienced. As God has forgiven each of us, we should remember the lost and pray for those who try to hurt us so that everyone’s heart is filled with the love of Jesus. In this, may every human being live in harmony and love. Amen.