

March 22, 2026

Pursuing the Kingdom: The Impossible Love of the Kingdom

Matthew 5:43-48

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...This morning we are continuing our theme of Pursuing the Kingdom as we make our way through the Gospel of Matthew learning what it means to be citizens of the Kingdom of God in our everyday lives. And the topic of our conversation today is going to be “love.”

Now, there is a kind of love that comes naturally to most people. It’s the love we feel for those who treat us well. When someone is kind to us, when someone supports us or when someone shows loyalty or affection, it is not difficult for us to respond with warm affection in return. In fact, most human relationships operate on this very principle.

Think about the way friendships usually form. People are drawn to those who share their interests, their values, their humor and their experiences. We gravitate toward those who agree with us and make us feel comfortable. The same dynamic appears in families, communities, workplaces and social circles. It doesn't matter the type of relationship, our love flows easily to those who are like us and treat us well.

But occasionally we encounter someone that exposes the limits of that kind of love. We live in a time and in a culture where we are encouraged, if not expected to have enemies. And not only to have enemies, but we live with a sense of animosity towards other people. It’s not enough to have simple disagreements anymore, we are expected to even hate those with whom we disagree, and unfortunately, this attitude comes far more naturally than most of us would care to admit.

Just look at the current landscape around us. We have people in our world today who are discarding longstanding friendships and disowning their own family members simply over who they voted for. It's hard to imagine being anymore divided than we are right now in this country.

Perhaps someone betrays our trust. Perhaps someone spreads rumors about us. Perhaps someone treats us with contempt, hostility or injustice. In those moments the natural instinct of the human heart is not love but retaliation or at least withdrawing from them to get even. We say things like, “I’ll still be nice, but I’m done with them,” or “I’ll keep my distance,” or even, “They don’t deserve my kindness.” However, what Jesus says in our passage today directly confronts that instinct and calls us to an even more radical type of love than we thought possible.

By the time we reach this passage in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has already taken familiar commandments and exposed the deeper intentions behind them. As we saw last week in vs. 21-42, Jesus taught that anger is the seed of murder, that lust is the seed of adultery, that truthfulness must define the life of the believer and that retaliation must give way to unexpected generosity.

Now he addresses the final, and perhaps even the most difficult, command in this entire section, to “love your enemies.” With these words Jesus introduces a vision of love so radical that it stretches far beyond the natural boundaries of our human capacity. It calls

for something deeper than emotional affection. It calls for a love that reflects the very character of God himself.

This passage invites us to ask the question, “What kind of love defines the people of the kingdom of God?” And we're going to see if we can find the answer to that question in our text today. If you are able, please stand with me in honor of God's word as I read from Matthew 5:43-48. [Read Passage]

Now, Jesus begins by referring to a command his audience had all heard before, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” The command to love one’s neighbor comes directly from the Mosaic Law in Lev. 19:18. Jesus will comment on this verse again when he is asked by an expert in the law about which commandment is the greatest in Matt. 22. And Jesus replies, “The first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second is like it, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” again quoting this same command given in Lev. 19:18. It is one of the most important ethical commands given in the entire law.

However, there is something that is off here as Jesus quotes this command that his audience is familiar with. The second half of the statement, “hate your enemy,” does not appear anywhere in scripture. Instead, it reflects the way many people had interpreted the command. If we are required to love our neighbors, it seems reasonable to assume that enemies fall outside that obligation to love.

Over time this interpretation became culturally accepted. Love for one’s neighbor was expected but it was limited to those within one's circle of community. Those outside the circle were viewed with hostility. And things are no different today. We divide the world into categories, don't we? Friends and enemies, insiders and outsiders, those who deserve kindness and those who deserve distance. But Jesus refuses to accept those boundaries and he begins to dismantle that framework, preparing his listeners to see that the love that is defined by the kingdom of God is not selective but available to everyone.

And, so, Jesus responds with a command that overturns our natural way of thinking. “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Now, this is not merely a call to control our hard feelings toward others. It is a call to actively pursue the good of those who oppose us.

The word “love” in this context does not primarily refer to emotional affection. The Greek word here for love is “agapao,” from the root word “agape” which refers to a deliberate commitment to seek the well-being of another person. It is usually used to describe God's unconditional love toward us, his children. But here, Jesus is calling us to love, “agapao,” even our enemies. In other words, we are to love others as God loves them. It is a love expressed through our actions, attitudes and even our prayers.

Notice the specific instruction Jesus gives, “pray for those who persecute you.” Prayer transforms the way we see people. It is difficult to sincerely pray for someone while simultaneously nurturing hatred toward them. If you have a problem with someone, start praying for them. And not just, “God fix them...”

Prayer forces us to recognize that even those we consider our enemies are people made in God’s image. When we pray for someone who has wronged us, we begin to see them not merely as enemies or adversaries but as fellow sinners in need of grace.

And this command is not in the abstract. It is personified in the life of Jesus himself. When he hung on the cross, surrounded by those who mocked him and crucified him, what did he pray? He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That is the love Jesus calls his followers to imitate.

And this is Jesus' point when he explains why such love is necessary in vs. 45, "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." In the ancient world, to be called someone's "son" meant to share their character and likeness. Jesus is saying that loving our enemies reflects the character of God. In the same way that Jesus demonstrated God's love for us by dying for his enemies, we are called to a radical love that shows the world what the love of God is like.

And he illustrates this with an example from creation. "God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Sunlight and rain are essential for life. They sustain crops, nourish the earth, and support the functions needed for human life. Yet God does not distribute these blessings selectively based on a person's goodness or whether they accept him or not. Both the righteous and the wicked receive these same gifts.

This is what we call "common grace," the kindness God shows to humanity regardless of whether people acknowledge him or not. Think about the countless blessings people experience every day. The beauty of a sunrise, the laughter of children and the satisfaction of meaningful work. These gifts flow from the generosity of God. And they are given not only to those who honor him but also to those who reject him. When Jesus commands his followers to love their enemies, he is inviting them to reflect that same love and grace.

Jesus continues by exposing the limitations of ordinary human love in the next few verses. "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" Tax collectors in Jesus' day, we know, were widely despised because they worked with the Roman authorities and often exploited their fellow citizens for profit. They were certainly not regarded as moral examples. Yet even they loved people who loved them.

And he goes on to say that even Gentiles are kind to their own families. To the Jews, Gentiles were considered spiritually unclean, idolatrous pagans. Many Jews even considered Gentiles as outsiders unworthy of being God's chosen people. But even the Gentiles treated their families well. Jesus says, "If you do the same, what more are you doing than anybody else?"

Jesus' point is simple. Loving those who treat us well requires no real effort on our part. It is the most basic form of "love" that the world knows. Anyone can show kindness to friends and family. That kind of behavior does not distinguish kingdom people from the rest of the world. The love of the kingdom must be different and set apart. The radical love that Jesus calls us to must pierce through every slight, both real or perceived, every wrong and every prejudice in order for us to show the world what the love of God is actually like.

Which brings us to the final verse of this section where Jesus brings this teaching to a stunning and weighty conclusion when he says, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This is not a casual encouragement toward following the rules better. It is a divine standard that exposes the depth of our need, perfection.

The word “perfect” carries the sense of completeness, wholeness, a love brought to its full expression. In the context, Jesus is not just talking about perfection only in the things mentioned in vs. 43-48, but in every area that he has talked about in the entire Sermon on the Mount up to this point. And he is not merely calling for flawless behavior, but for a heart that reflects the unconditional, all-encompassing love of God. A love that extends even to our enemies.

This command shatters any illusion that righteousness can be achieved through our good works and rule-keeping. Instead, it drives us to recognize that the standard is nothing less than the perfect character of God Himself.

Yet this is not a call to despair, but a call to transformation. What God commands, he also provides through his grace in the atoning work of Jesus. Paul makes this clear in his letters to the early church. No one is perfectly righteous, no not one. (Rom. 3:10) For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:23) But he (God the Father) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the perfect righteousness of Christ. (2 Cor. 5:21) It's all by God's grace and not by our own doing (Eph. 2:8-9) and this grace shapes us into people whose love is no longer partial or reactive, but mature, steady, and reflective of the Father's heart.

So this verse presses us beyond superficial faith and into a deeper dependence on God, where holiness is not just something we strive for, because we can't attain it on our own anyways, but something God is actively forming within us.

So how do we apply this text to our lives this morning? Well, this command to love our enemy raises immediate practical questions. Namely, “How do we love in a world filled with conflict, injustice, and pain?”

First of all, we must understand that loving our enemies requires a supernatural transformation. The natural human heart cannot come up with this kind of love on its own. It only comes as the result of God's Spirit reshaping our desires and attitudes. And the only way...

And one of the practical ways that we can begin to live this out, as was already mentioned, is through prayer. When we pray for those who have wronged us, we begin to release the grip of resentment. We entrust justice to God rather than carrying the burden ourselves. And we ask God to help us to see others as he sees them and then love accordingly.

Another step is refusing to participate in cycles of retaliation. Bitterness and hatred often spread through escalation. One insult answered by another, one act of aggression answered by a greater one. The Kingdom love that Jesus calls us to in this passage interrupts that cycle. We do not repay evil with evil but with the love and grace of Christ that he has lovingly shown us.

So as we come to the end of this passage, it is impossible to ignore how demanding Jesus' command here truly is. To love those who love us is easy. To love those who misunderstand us is difficult. But to love those who oppose us, harm us, or persecute us, that seems impossible. And in many ways, it is impossible apart from the transforming work of Christ in our lives.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus does not call us to a love he has not already demonstrated. While we were still enemies of God, alienated by sin, resistant to his

authority, Christ loved us and died for us. (Rom. 5:8) He pursued us. He forgave us. He gave his life for us. The cross is the ultimate display of love for one's enemies.

And when we begin to grasp the depth of that grace, something begins to change in our hearts. Gratitude replaces pride. Mercy replaces bitterness. Compassion replaces resentment. We begin to realize that every person we encounter, even and especially those who oppose us, is someone for whom Christ died. And so the love of the kingdom grows not from human determination but from the grace of God himself as we endeavor to show his love to those that need to know it.

As we leave this passage, we do so with humility and hope. Humility because we recognize how far we still have to grow. But we can also be filled with hope today because the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead is at work within us, shaping us into people who reflect the character of our Father in heaven. And as that transformation unfolds within us, the world begins to see something extraordinary, a community defined not by retaliation or division, but by a love that reaches even to our enemies. That is the "impossible" love of the kingdom. Let's pray.

Benediction: May you go from this place shaped by the words of Jesus, no longer loving only those who love you, but reflecting the radical, gracious love of your heavenly Father. May God give you strength to bless those who oppose you, courage to pray for those who wound you, and grace to extend kindness where it is least expected.

Go in peace, to love as you have been loved. Amen.