

“Distinct Love”— Matthew 5:43-48

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June 14, 2015

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take your Bible and let's turn to Matthew 5 (page 810 in pew Bibles). Let's begin reading in verse 43. This is God's Word...

“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 sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 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, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:43-48)

Two weeks ago, we looked at these same verses. We examined what Jesus says about loving your neighbor and where that teaching comes from in the Old Testament. We went into great detail on how this teaching was misunderstood in Matthew's day and in our own. So most of the main ideas of this passage we have covered. If you missed that sermon, it's online to hear or read on our website, www.welovethegospel.com.

What I want us to do today is consider two principles in this text that help us to understand what Jesus is getting at when He calls us to love and pray for our enemies. But these two principles—one that relates to morality and one that relates to missions—are principles that make a difference in many other areas of our lives as well, which I hope to illustrate along the way. So that's the plan today.

You know though that “love your enemies” is not what anyone wants to be told. We may even want an explanation as to why we should love our enemies? There are several biblical answers that could be given, but the highlighted reason in this passage is quite simple: We should love our enemies *because God does!*

We have looked at several examples of this, but the one that Jesus mentions here involves what theologians call “common grace,” those gifts that God gives to people indiscriminately. He says in verse 45 that the good and the wicked receive rain and sunshine from God. That's grace. And those generous things that God does, for all people, are intended to communicate God's love and to produce the sort of thanksgiving that looks for a source to express that gratitude. Of course, God's common grace largely goes unnoticed. But Jesus wants us to notice here what it teaches us about God. It demonstrates that He shows love to even His enemies.

We should do the same thing. He says in verse 44, you should “*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*” When we do this it demonstrates our kinship with the Father. God's people, who have been adopted as His children because of Christ's death in their place and resurrection from the dead, begin increasingly to take on the character of their Father. Just like a son will often pick up the mannerisms of his earthly father, so too God's children, as they interact more and more with Him,

begin to take on a measure of His character (cf. 5:45).ⁱ And just like a son aspires to be like his loving father, so too we desire to be like our heavenly Father.ⁱⁱ He loves His enemies (including us formerly!) so we too want to be like our Abba.

I think that is the basic point of the final verse of the chapter—“*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (5:48).ⁱⁱⁱ I don’t know about you, but that is a verse that has given me a lot of angst in the past. Be perfect! How could I ever live up to that? It’s a great ideal, but it has the ring of something unattainable. There are some though who have attempted to buffer the command by appealing to the Greek at this point. It is argued that the word translated “perfect” here, usually means, “mature,” “complete,” “fully developed,” or having reached its intended goal, not necessarily “sinless.”^{iv} True enough. But I’m not sure that blunts the intensity the command all that much. Is it really any relief to say that we don’t need to be perfect, but we should be as mature as God[!]? Hardly. To me, that doesn’t soften the command at all.

So what does He mean? At this point interpreters go in many different directions. For example, some people view that verse as the summary statement for the entire chapter (or at least from verse 21). It may be that. Certainly in Luke’s account of this teaching topics like loaning to those who ask and turning the other cheek and other ideas present in Matthew 5 are covered under the umbrella of “love your enemies.” So maybe it is best to view the sum total of these teachings as, essentially, illustrations of being perfect like our heavenly Father.

It’s also worth mentioning that Luke wraps the section up slightly differently. He says, “*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*” So what does that tell us? It tells us, more than likely, that Luke understood the call to “be perfect” as essentially equivalent to a call to “be merciful.” Is that a misunderstanding on Luke’s part? I don’t think so. It’s a clue that helps us understand the nuance here in Matthew.

Consider the logic and flow of Matthew 5:43-48. When we read this section carefully, it’s pretty clear that Jesus is calling us to be loving and merciful to our enemies. Then He illustrates how God the Father is loving and merciful toward His enemies. Then, in verse 48, we are told to be like God. So in the context, “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” is a way of summarizing the call to show love and mercy to our enemies, which is consistent with Luke’s summary as well.

Therefore, I understand why so many have taken the word “perfect” not in the ordinary sense that we use it in English to call to mind absolute moral flawlessness, but in the sense that’s more typical in Greek to describe “completeness” and, in this context, it’s a completeness that is closely connected to the love being described here. “Thus,” as Scot McKnight writes, “Jesus is urging his followers to be ‘perfect in love’ or to ‘love completely’ in the sense that they are to love not only fellow Jewish neighbors but also enemy neighbors.”^v That’s the point of the rhetorical questions Jesus asks in verse 46 and 47, which we will explore shortly. It’s also interesting to note that the only other occurrence of the word “perfect” in Matthew is found in 19:21, where it’s used to drive home the point of loving your neighbor as yourself.^{vi}

So, let me bring this all together, the principle “be perfect as God is perfect” is a bigger concept that could be cited to justify any of God’s moral commands. In this context, it’s the trump card laid out at the end to disarm any argument against loving our enemies. We should. We should precisely because doing so is an imitation of God. That’s how that “be perfect” principle works in this context...but it’s

worth pausing to recognize the connection between that principle and true morality in general. Here's the lesson...

A Word on Morality—True Morality Derives from the Character of God

D. A. Carson writes,

“...to love one's enemies is characteristic of God (5:45). But love is not the only characteristic of God which Jesus expects his followers to emulate. As the passage continues, it becomes painfully obvious that Jesus is setting out a breathtaking description of morality which makes God himself the standard of all of it.”^{vii}

In other words, when God tells His people to be perfect as He is perfect, He is reminding them that true morality and ethics derive from His character and nature alone. Let me show you two reasons why that matters for us. The first reason derives from the realm of apologetics and the second relates to cultural engagement.

When it comes to apologetics, the existence of a morality is a strong argument for the existence of God. This was something that God really used to help me believe and set aside my own skepticisms of Christianity. Everyone gravitates to different arguments. This was one that I found rather convincing.

One of the most famous atheist, and arguably the most influential of our generations, was a man named Christopher Hitchens, who died just a few years ago at MD Anderson in Houston at age 62. He was an incredible writer who I enjoyed reading for many reasons, though we did not share the same perspective on most things.

For example, his best known book was called “God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.” Obviously we disagree on that one. But the claim of subtitle—religion poisons everything—illustrates a major problem I began to have, years ago in my more skeptical days, with atheism. Let me explain.

It is pretty clear from the subtitle of the book that in Hitchens' mind poisoning everything is a bad thing. “Shame on you, religion.” But think for a moment what a statement like that presupposes. Religion poisons everything. Is that bad? Hitchens, no doubt, would have said, “Of course it's bad.” But on what basis is that judgment made? What gives anyone the right to say it's a bad thing? What universal authority is that conclusion based on? To claim that something is “bad” you are appealing to something (even if you don't realize it). What are you appealing to?

Hitchens had a friend named Douglas Wilson, who was a Christian pastor who toured with him and shared the Gospel with him on several occasions. Wilson responded to Hitchens' subtitled with a word—“So?” He then unpacked that word like this...

“Religion poisons everything. ‘So? Does this offend anyone whose opinion should matter to me? Is there some kind of rule against poisoning everything? Who made *that* rule? And who died and left that particular busybody king? Get your moralism out of my face, Hitchens... When Hitchens says that religion poisons everything, he says that as though it were a bad thing. He doesn't *show* that it is a bad thing. He doesn't *prove* that it is a bad thing. He doesn't even *demonstrate* that it is a bad thing. He just rummages around in all the old Sunday School lessons from his upbringing, hidden in some shoebox in his intellectual attic, blows the

dust off his best sanctimonious judgmentalism, and declares that we all have to submit to the Word from his attic. ‘Thou shalt not poison everything.’ Sez who?’^{viii}

By this Wilson does *not* mean, nor do I, that something that poisons everything would not be a bad thing. It would be. But what is the basis for that assessment? I’ll be honest about mine...it’s revelation. Not of the personal subjective variety. No, it’s the divinely inspired Word of God that reveals what is right and wrong in God’s sight and grounds that morality in the character and nature of God. “*Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” And on that basis you could make a case that something that truly poisons everything is in fact a bad thing. I can do more than identify right and wrong, I can account for it.

But on what basis can people like Mr. Hitchens make a claim of moral indignation? Obviously not from the authority of the Scriptures, because they are no more authoritative to them than a Harry Potter book. So what then? Some innate human solidarity? That doesn’t exist! If it did, we would not see all this social unrest on the news every day. Because it feels right or wrong? Only a little reflection is necessary to know that this is not an adequate foundation for morality. What feels right and wrong to you is different from what felt right or wrong to a Hitler, or a sociopath, or a terrorist. “Yeah, but those guys are wrong.” I agree, but on what basis do you say they’re wrong? Your feelings? Is that the authority? Because they could just as easily reverse the tables on you and say you’re the one with misguided feelings. How do you determine whose feelings are right? That’s a problem. I suppose someone could resort to nihilism, but I’ve never met an atheist who really believes this in practice. No one is a nihilist when their car is broken into, or they’re the target of racial slurs, or their home is vandalized. No, no, a sense of “oughtness” kicks in at that point.

So we are right back where we started: what is the foundation for the moral indignation of an atheist? If not self, what? The laws of society? Well, that won’t work either, for what would we do with laws that say a person of a certain race can’t associate with people of another, or use public transportation, or vote? A law is not morally right simply because it is law. But at least with law there is an attempt to get outside of oneself for authority...now we are getting somewhere.

Maybe the authority should be reason...or science...or better, reason and science. Yeah that’s it, reason and science. Hitchens seemed to assume this, with some qualifications.

“Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not faith. We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason.”^{ix}

Amen. At least to that last part. I too would distrust anything that contradicts science and outrages reason. It’s not Christianity versus science. To borrow the cliché, “all truth is God’s truth.” Science has not destroyed my faith; it has confirmed it. And what of reason? Well, I wouldn’t be a Christian if I didn’t think that Christianity was the most reasonable worldview. It is the most reasonable explanation for the situation I see in the world. It’s not a science book. But on everything it addresses it is reasonable.^x We don’t have time to discuss the myth that “religious” people are the only ones with faith and belief. The fact is that all people have faith in something. Hitchens included. It’s just a different something. But it is faith.^{xi}

So here’s the point. Morality can’t be based on personal feelings, because when your desires bump up against and contradict Hitler’s desires, without God, “there is no standard of virtue or goodness above

us to decide the question” of who is right.^{xii} It can’t be societal laws, for the same reason and we would all agree there is such thing as immoral laws. It can’t be scientific naturalism because by its nature (pardon the pun) its process is impersonal and not driven by morality. So Darwinian evolution can’t account for a consistent morality because “might makes right” in that framework and, therefore, what is “right” is not fixed. It evolves. It is determined by the fittest survivor. Thus no action is necessarily “wrong” because, as Wilson quips, in every case, “We’re only doing what protoplasm does under these circumstances and at these temperatures.”^{xiii} That’s the logical outcome of the Darwinian models.

Do you see then? The existence of morality (which, in my experience, most non-Christians want to affirm too) points necessarily to the existence of God. This was an important apologetic in my life, because before wrestling with this I couldn’t account for my sense of right and wrong by anything other than the existence of God. In time I came to see that the Biblical worldview best accounts for what I was seeing in myself and in the world. In the God of the Bible I saw someone who can account for the existence of morality. As Christians we can do more than just do good or distinguish between morally good and evil acts (which atheists can do too), we can account for them in a way that I could never do before I was a Christian. God’s character and nature are the basis of morality.

Now then, how does that relate to societal engagement? Well, if morality derives from the character and nature of God, then since God is unchanging so is what is right and wrong. We have no authority, then, to redefine what is morally right or morally wrong. Only God determines that. So when societal norms shift, true morality does not.

We have to look to what God has revealed in His Word about Himself and His calling on our lives to determine what is “right” and what is “sin.” Our society no longer does that. More and more churches in our context no longer do that. To consult and submit to the Bible is no longer fashionable in our setting. As a consequence, we will increasingly be demonized and socially exiled in our setting. That’s just the sad reality of things, apart from a revival of God throughout this land. But all the accolades of the world will never compare to being “*sons of your Father who is in heaven*” (Matthew 5:45), the hope held out to us in this text.

We are to imitate God, not get swept up in the fickle winds of culture. This is why we love our enemies. This is why we pray for those who persecute us. But the New Testament applies this principle to all of our behavior. For example, Paul said to the Ephesians,

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 4:32-5:2; cf. 1 Peter 1:13-25; 1 John 4:7-12)

We imitate the example that God has given us because it is the right thing to do. We seek to perfectly love as we have seen God love perfectly. He is our example. He shows us the right course. His character shapes our morality. That’s why we love our enemies.

But there is another very important principle in this text that I want us to see. This one relates to Christian mission.

A Word on Mission—Christian Love Should Be Distinct and Point to God

Last time I preached to you I gave several examples from Christian history of believers loving their enemies. We looked at Jesus Himself, who prayed for His executioners as they were doing Him physical harm and in the act of murdering Him. We looked at the first Christian martyr, Stephen, who did the same. We looked at Polycarp, the pupil of the Apostle John. We looked at George Wishart, the Scottish Reformer who kissed his executioner on the cheek and said, “may that be a token that I forgive you.”^{xiv} And I closed with the testimony of Corrie ten Boom, who described the moment she came face to face with and forgave one of the guards who held her captive in a Nazi concentration camp.

I asked, why do we find stories like this so compelling and moving? The answer is because in them we see a glimpse, a shadow, of the love of God. Their stories point to His story. Their forgiving their enemies was prompted by God’s forgiveness of them. It’s a love that stands out in this world. It’s counter-cultural. It’s compelling. It’s shocking. It’s attractive. It’s distinct.^{xv} And that’s kind of Jesus’ point. Jesus is calling us in Matthew 5 to express a love that is distinct and shocking to the world around us, because that’s precisely the love we have experienced from God the Father!

We don’t love merely like the world around us loves. We love like God loves and that stands out in the world. That’s what Jesus was getting at in verses 46 and 47. Look there. He says, “*For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others?*” The questions highlight the irony. The religious leaders and many in Jesus’ audience thought that they were so much better, so much more righteous, than tax collectors and all the non-Jews. Yet in reality they were no more righteous in the way they loved. They loved only their own ilk or those who loved them or could benefit them. They loved their kith and kin. They loved their friends. There is nothing distinct about that. That just makes them like everyone else, including, Jesus points out, the people they despised (tax-collectors and Gentiles). They unknowingly became what they hated. We will too, if we’re not careful. We’ll just change the dress code and look down our noses on all the “others.”

Church bodies are prone to this same blind spot as well. We can think we are doing well in an area when we really exhibit a need to grow. Here’s an example one writer gives,

“Many churches seem cold and unwelcoming to visitors, but almost every church thinks it is friendly. Why? Because the members are friendly with their friends. They greet everyone who greets them. This is not noteworthy. Genuine love keeps an eye open for the quiet, the awkward, and the friendless, and seeks them out.”^{xvi}

You get the idea. But do you see the point of Jesus’ questions?^{xvii} If all we do is love the loveable, then no one in the world really cares because everyone in the world already does that. That’s just normal. And, at the end of the day, that’s just prejudicial love that amounts to self-love. It’s self-serving because it loves only those who are convenient to love or who may help us get ahead. It loves when it’s advantageous to love. It’s a love that returns favors. It’s just loving yourself. And if that’s all we do, then we will fit in alright, but there is no impact and power to that kind of love. Everybody loves like this.

But everybody does not love and pray for their enemies. That’s stands out. That raises questions. If you saw a foot of snow hit the ground in Tyler tomorrow, you wouldn’t just say “oh that’s cool.” No, you’d say, “what in the world is going on?” You’d DVR all the local weather reports. You’d ask questions. You’d fear the world was about to end. You get the idea. It would prompt you to ask questions. When we love like God calls us to love it’s distinct like snow in the Texas summer, so something similar

happen. People's curiosity is piqued. Questions are raised. And those questions can't be answered apart from the Gospel.

Loving enemies like Jesus describes raises questions that will never make sense to the world until what God has done for us in Christ makes sense to them. J. Oswald Chambers once said, "The Master expects from His disciples such conduct as can be explained only in terms of the supernatural."^{xviii} It's that whole salt and light thing Jesus talked about earlier. When we love as God the Father loves, then others "*may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*" (Matthew 5:16). And in this way, loving and praying for our enemies has a missional goal. Loving in a distinctly Christian way has a missional goal. It stands out and raises questions that have only Gospel answers. Therefore, our obedience occasions opportunities to share the Gospel with people. This is huge!

This is, by the way, why we need bad things to happen. When bad things happen we have an opportunity to show distinct love. For example, let's say you go to a restaurant and get horrible service. The drink orders are wrong. The table next to you gets your food. There are eggshells in your eggplant (don't ask). The waiter spills coffee on you. It's just all around bad service. What are you inclined to do in a situation like that? You feel like you have to teach that server a lesson and you do it either through a lecture or a horrible tip. Well, you are right, you will teach him a lesson. The question is what lesson? Will it be the world's lesson, something that's performance based? Or will it be a lesson on grace? You tip him anyway. Maybe abundantly. You empathize with him. No one who is making his or her livelihood in the service industry is intentionally trying to mess all that up. So you can empathize. You've had days when nothing seemed to go right either. You can extend grace. And in so doing you will surprise the waiter. The bad service occasioned an opportunity for a distinct love. When they look at the tip, it might raise Gospel questions. "Why were they so nice, even though I performed so poorly? Why were they so gracious? What is different about that couple?" There's a Gospel opportunity that wouldn't have existed apart from the bad situation. So what will you do? You can either reinforce the lesson the world would teach in that moment or you can give a lesson in grace, a lesson in distinctly Christian love. That's your choice.

Are we loving people? Do we love in a distinctly Christian way? That's what Jesus is pushing us to do with respect to our enemies. But this principle of distinctiveness is one that can be laid over everything we do as a church. There a lot of good things that churches do, but we should always be asking are we doing them in distinctly Christian ways?

I gave an example of this on one of our Wednesday night studies that related to the pursuit of community. Every church says they wants and values community. People come to church seeking community. Many people find a sense of community in a church. This is all good. But what kind of community did they find?

For example, let's say a single mom comes into the church and wants to plug in. She finds a Sunday school class or a small group that has several other single moms in it and she quickly integrates and thrives. Success, right? Not so fast.

In a book called *The Compelling Community*, authors Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop point out that what has actually occurred in that scenario is "*a demographic phenomenon* and not necessarily a *gospel phenomenon*." They write,

“Single moms [or dads, or seniors, or millennials, of whatever, fill in the blank] gravitate to each other regardless of whether or not the gospel is true. This community is wonderful and helpful—but its existence says nothing about the power of the gospel... There is nothing wrong with wanting to be with people of similar life experience. It’s entirely natural and can be spiritually beneficial. But if this is the sum total of what we call ‘church community,’ I’m afraid we’ve built something that could exist even if God didn’t.”^{xxix}

That is a very good point. You can have community without it being distinctly Christian. When that happens it can grow churches but fail in some aspects of missions. They continue,

“...building communities purely through natural bonds has a cost as well as a benefit. Often, we look at tools like the single moms small group and see only the positive. But there is a cost as well: if groups like this come to *characterize* community in our churches, then our community ceases to be remarkable to the world around us.”^{xxx}

In other words, the world looks in and the community they see makes sense to them. It’s just like the community they see elsewhere. It’s affinity based. It’s like a club. It’s not distinct. It’s just like the community we can experience in the world. What we need is something distinctly Christian. We need a community that is “gospel-revealing”, where “many relationships would never exist but for the truth and power of the gospel—either because of the depth of care for each other or because two people in relationship have little in common but Christ... and so this community *reveals* the power of the gospel.”^{xxxi}

When the world looks in and sees people gathering together, loving each other, breaking bread, holding hands and hugging necks with people that everywhere else in the world would never even be spotted together, they just may ask some questions. What? How? When democrat and republican can worship side by side, when Jew and Roman can wash each other’s feet, when I can enter a church in Uganda and worship with people I have nothing in common with except Jesus, when suit wearing seniors are embracing skinny jean wearing hipsters, when the white collar CEO is studying the Bible in Sunday school under the recovering addict, when people of every race and generation delight in and can’t wait every week to come together, when every dividing line we see in the world seems to have no place in our faith-family, the world takes notice. It’s going to be confusing because it cannot be explained apart from what Christ has done through His cross and resurrection to forgive our sins and bring us into His body. That’s community that points to God and reveals the power of the Gospel. That’s distinctly Christian community. Does that make sense?

And, get this, our distinct love and prayers for enemies helps create this distinct community that every church should long for. Why? Because sometimes those enemies become brothers and sisters. Just ask the Apostle Paul. That guy was a terrorist. Then Christ confronted him on road to Damascus and the trajectory of his life changed. He believed and he became a brother. “Who knows how often God has rescued the righteous, not by destroying their persecutors but, as in Paul’s case, converting them.”^{xxxii} And one of the ways God brings peace between enemies is through distinctly Christian love.

This text suggests that too. Verse 45 holds out the hope of being “sons” of the Father. This same hope is applied to the “peacemakers” described in the Beatitudes, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*” (Matthew 5:9). This probably suggests a connection between peacemaking, on the one hand, and loving and praying for enemies, on the other. The latter is probably a means of pursuing the former. We can be peacemakers by loving and praying for our enemies.

And when you find yourselves struggling to find motivation to obey the Lord on this, remind yourself that what Jesus is asking you to do He done for you. The Bible calls us “enemies” of God and yet Jesus laid His life down on the cross for us. We were God’s enemies, but because of His love we can be forgiven of our hostility and every wrong we have ever committed and have a new life with God. That’s amazing! Jesus came and died and rose from the dead to save sinners like us. We can each be saved from Gods wrath and eternal condemnation by believing this “good news,” acknowledging our sin and need for Jesus to save us, and turning from our sin and self to Jesus, trusting in Him alone for salvation. That’s the faith that saves. That is the good news that we call the Gospel.

Once you are a Christian, God provides us with the strength and help to obey the Lord and follow Jesus. It’s not always easy. We won’t do it perfectly. But when we struggle and when we fall short, as will frequently and inevitably happen, we are reminded of our poverty of spirit, we grieve or sin and failure, we look to the same Gospel and we see anew that Jesus made a way for our shortcomings to be forgiven and us to be restored. We hear in this Gospel that our standing with God is not based on our failures or successes, but on the victory that Christ won on our behalf. You have failed. But Christ did not! So you’re secure! We let the Spirit of God minister to us through the same powerful good news that saved us. We can be lifted up and we can press forward. Even forward to loving and praying for our enemies.

Pray with me...

ⁱ Verse 45 holds out the hope of being “sons” of the Father. This same hope is applied to the “peacemakers” described in the Beatitudes, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*” (Matthew 5:9). This probably suggests a connection between peacemaking, on the one hand, and loving and praying for enemies, on the other. The latter is probably a means of pursuing the former. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: SCM Press, 1959), 153.

ⁱⁱ Daniel Doriani correctly notes, “Jesus does not mean that acts of love are the instrument we use to gain the status of sons. Rather, we *demonstrate* that we are God’s children when we love as our Father loves.” Daniel M. Doriani, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Character of a Disciple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 101. Similarly, John MacArthur writes, “Loving as God loves does not *make* us sons of the Father, but gives evidence that we already are His children. When a life reflects God’s nature it proves that life now *possesses* His nature by the new birth.” John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7* (MNTC; Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 348.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Greek, the “You” is emphatic! He is not speaking to people in general, but His followers in particular. Charles Quarles writes, “The future indicative verb ‘be’ in Matt 5:48 may express a promise for the future: ‘you will be perfect.’ As in the Beatitudes, this promise may anticipate the consummation of the kingdom when Jesus’ disciples will be ‘filled with righteousness’ (v. 6) and ‘will see God’ (v. 8). However, the LXX frequently used the future indicative to express divine commands with great solemnity. The OT commands in Matt 5:21, 27, and 43 all use future indicative verbs. Furthermore, verse 48 is itself an echo of OT commands that use the future indicative. Thus the verse should be read as a command. One should not read this command to be perfect as a frustrating demand for the impossible that is irrelevant for modern-day disciples. The ethic of Jesus’ kingdom is full perfection. Believers should strive for this ideal with the conviction that, as children of God, they are heirs of His character and will resemble Him.” Charles Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ’s Message to the Modern Church* (NACSBT; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 170. It may also interest some to know that a similar instruction is given in Leviticus 19:2 (“*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy*”), the same chapter where Israel was told to “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (19:18), which is what Jesus leads with.

^{iv} For a quick overview of various positions from scholars through the centuries, see McKnight, 145-146. He concludes that “a consensus is emerging that ‘perfect’ is essentially love of others” (ibid., 146). Jesus was not likely speaking in Greek when He preached, so many have wondered what Hebrew or Aramaic word might stand behind the Greek. We cannot know with certainty. Yet Knox Chamblin observes, “*Teleios* [the adjective used here and translated “perfect”] is thoroughly Hebraic in character. With one exception, every instance of this adjective in the LXX translates one of two Hebrew word groups. The first is *šlm*, which can attest (i) that a building project has been *completed*, (ii) that vows have been *fulfilled*, or (iii) that a person is *fully committed* or *wholeheartedly devoted* to Yahweh. The second, *tmm*, can denote (i) the *completion* of a task, (ii) a sacrifice *without blemish*, or (iii) a *blameless* person. The *blameless* are, of course, not *sinless*. Person’s identified by *šlm* and *tmm* submit to God’s *torah*, which includes commands to offer sacrifices for personal sins. A chief reason for these people’s utter devotion to God is the knowledge that they are sinners in perpetual need of his salvation.” Knox Chamblin, *Matthew: Volume 1: Chapters 1-13* (MC; Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2010), 382.

^v Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (SGBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 146. “The word ‘perfect,’ we conclude with the emerging consensus above, means ‘to love all humans, Jews and Romans, as neighbors.’ This view of perfection lines up with Jesus’ own hermeneutical approach to Torah. He says in Matthew 22:34-40 that the Torah (and the Prophets) hang on two commands—to love God and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Perfection is to be the person who treats everyone as the neighbor, and this fulfills the entirety of God’s will. This too is surpassing righteousness (5:17-20).” Ibid., 147.

^{vi} Chamblin, 384.

^{vii} D. A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5-10* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), 57.

^{viii} Douglas Wilson, *God Is* (American Vision, 2008), 5.

^{ix} Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 5.

^x Speaking of that which “outrages reason,” did Hitchens really write, “Our belief is not a belief”? Yes.

^{xi} Hitchens closes this chapter on a different, and somewhat ironic note: “Religious faith is, precisely *because* we are still-evolving creatures, ineradicable. It will never die out, or at least not until we get over our fear of death, and of the dark, and of the unknown, and of each other. For this reason, I would not prohibit it even if I thought I could. Very generous of me, you may say. But will religion grant me the same indulgence?...I would be quite content to go to their children’s bar mitzvahs, to marvel at their Gothic cathedrals, to ‘respect’ their belief that the Koran was dictated, though exclusively in Arabic, to an illiterate merchant, or to interest myself in Wicca and Hindu and Jain consolations. And as it happens, I will continue to do this without insisting on the polite reciprocal condition—which is *that they in turn leave me alone*. But this, religion is ultimately incapable of doing.” (Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 12-13) Why write the book if you just want to be left alone? You write the book because you think its contents are true and you want the world to know. Maybe religious adherents won’t leave him alone for the same reason. A different evangelism is at work in Mr. Hitchens’ book, but it is

evangelism nonetheless. I can't speak for all religions, but I would have to agree that biblical Christianity cannot content itself with any forced isolationism. Why? It's not because we want to win an argument for argument's sake. It's because Christianity is Gospel. It is "good news." If we have good news that can help any person in this world then, of course, we want everybody to know about it. It's a love thing. And that love extends to Mr. Hitchens as well. That is why I'm thankful for pastors like Douglas Wilson who have engaged Hitchens' arguments critically, but with care for the soul.

^{xii} Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow, *Is God Just a Human Invention? And Seventeen Other Questions Raised by New Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 199.

^{xiii} Wilson. Even Richard Dawkins, maybe the most influential living atheist, admits that accounting for morality by means of Darwinian principles is counterintuitive. "On the face of it, the Darwinian idea that evolution is driven by natural selection seems ill-suited to explain such goodness as we possess, or our feelings of morality, decency, empathy, and pity. Natural selection can easily explain hunger, fear, and sexual lust, all of which straightforwardly contribute to survival or the preservation of genes." Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 245-246.

^{xiv} From Jim Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, ed. W. Grinton Berry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 252.

^{xv} Martin Lloyd-Jones once said, "We can emphasize that by putting it like this. The Christian is the man who is above, and goes beyond, the natural man at his very best and highest.... There are many people in the world who are not Christian but who are very moral and highly ethical, men whose word is their bond, and who are scrupulous and honest, just and upright. You never find them doing a shady thing to anybody; but they are not Christian, and they say so. They do not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and may have rejected the whole of the New Testament teaching with scorn. But they are absolutely straightforward, honest and true.... Now the Christian, by definition here, is a man who is capable of doing something that the best natural man cannot do. He goes beyond and does more than that; he exceeds. He is separate from all others, and not only from the worst among others, but from the very best and highest among them." Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, n.d.), 313.

^{xvi} Doriani, 103.

^{xvii} Carson writes, "Tax collectors may have a bad name today; but it is nothing like the reputation they earned in first-century Palestine. The Roman Empire used a tax-farming system. The government would specify the amount to be collected from a certain area, and appoint a man to gather it. This man would in turn appoint men under him, who would appoint others under them. Each appointee had to obtain his quota, and whatever else he got he could keep. The potential for bribery and corruption all the way up the tax-farming ladder was enormous, and every avenue was assiduously exploited. Naturally, the Jewish tax collectors were loathed, and doubly loathed among the Jews because they came into contact with the Gentiles, the Roman overlords, and thus became ceremonially unclean. But even these low, traitorous, disgusting people enjoyed friends—other tax collectors, for a start! So how is a disciple of Jesus in any way superior to the despised tax collector if he only loves his friends?" Carson, 56.

^{xviii} Cited in MacArthur, 349.

^{xix} Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 20-21.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, 22.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 22-23.

^{xxii} Chamblin, 381.