



Having the Cross in Your Heart

St. Matthew 5:43-47

Fr. William Klock

September 28, 2008 – Trinity 19

This morning as we continue our study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount we come to the last of his six real-world examples of what it means for the Christian to really fulfil the Law. And I stress especially that these are real-world examples as we come this week to what I think is the most challenging of them all. It's the one statement that for many really sums up what Jesus was all about in his ministry, yet at the same time is probably for us the most challenging and condemning statement in all of Holy Scripture.

Open your Bibles and look with me at Matthew 5:43-47. Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. 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? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Jesus begins again with the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees – with their twisted version of God's Law: "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." Nowhere does the Law say any such thing. Leviticus 19:18 commands that God's people are to love their neighbours. Remember that the point of the Law was to show that no man could live up to God's holy standard – that every one of us is sinner, condemned to suffer the wrath of a holy and just God, and therefore in need of the righteousness of another – in need of a Redeemer. But the Pharisees bent and twisted the Law into their own set of rules that they could keep and feel good about. So they parsed this command out and came to the conclusion that if we are to love our neighbours, then it must also

be true that we are to hate our enemies. Then they went on to determine precisely who their neighbours were and who their enemies were – they wanted to know whom they were obliged to love and whom they could hate.

And in doing this they turned a blind eye on the rest of the Law. To them the "enemy" was anyone who was not a Jew, or any Jew who collaborated with Gentiles. They hated the entire outside world. And yet God, earlier in that same chapter, had given the command that the Jews were to leave the gleaning of their fields and vineyards "for the poor *and the sojourner*" – the alien non-Jew living in Israel. In verse 34 God says, "You shall treat the stranger who *sojourns* with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself." And in Exodus 12:49 God said, "There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who *sojourns* among you." Even the Gentile living in Israel was to be shown love.

The Law also said that if you came across your enemy's ox or ass wandering astray, you were to catch him and return him to your enemy. If you saw that your enemy's ox or ass had fallen down while trying to carry a big load, you were to stop and help. Deuteronomy gives almost exactly the same commands in relation to the ox or ass of a brother, so it's very telling that here the same command is given specifically in regard to an enemy. Of course the book of Proverbs also tells us, "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (Proverbs 25:21). That was God's standard. It's a hard standard, and so in typical fashion, the Pharisees lightened the load of the Law. They twisted it until it fit with what the natural sinful man does naturally: he loves his friends and hates his enemies.

But you see, that's just it. Sinful humanity is only capable of the low standard that the Pharisees set. It's vitally important that we get this: the standard of love that Jesus sets out for us here is a standard that only God can meet. Notice in verse 45 Jesus gives us the "why." He tells us to love our enemies and to do good to those who persecute us, but why? "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." Jesus wants our character and our conduct to be like God's. The love of God is completely without discrimination. He shows his love to the just and the unjust, and for that reason so should we. Because

it results in action, our love is to express itself in action. Our calling as sons of the Father is to love those who are, by every human standard, our enemies.

The fact that what Jesus describes here is a divine standard and not a human one is really underscored by the word that St. Matthew chose to use. The Greeks had four different words for love. St. Matthew doesn't use the words that refer to sexual love, familial love, or even brotherly love. He specifically uses the word that describes *divine* love. You've probably heard it before: *agape*. It's the same word that Jesus used when he asked St. Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you *love* me?" *Agape* is a love that loves without any variation or compromise. It loves even when the object of that love is totally unlovable by human standards. It's love that loves even when no love is given in return or when hate is given back to the lover. It is godlike love.

Agape is a love that loves even when there's no hope of love in return. It's God's love. And yet Christ calls us to live it in our *own* lives. The question then is: Where do we find it and how do we learn what it is? And I'll tell you, the only place we can truly find it is in Jesus Christ and in his ministry for us at the Cross.

Here's an interesting, but very, very important fact that I've discovered – one I hope you'll take with you and always remember: almost every time the New Testament tells us about the love of God, it also tells us about the Cross of Christ. Whenever the New Testament writers tell us about real and divine love, they link it to the Cross. They understood that the Cross is the place where we see the outpouring of *agape*, of God's love. Here are a few examples. You all are probably familiar with these verses, you may even have memorised them, but maybe this will help you think of them and remember them in a new way.

John 3:16: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Galatians 2:20: I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

1 John 4:10: **This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.** (NIV)

Romans 5:8: **But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

Notice how in each case, whether it's Jesus, St. John, or St. Paul speaking, the cross is made the measure of God's love.

But it's not just Christ's death on the Cross that makes God's love such an amazing thing. It's that Christ died *for sinners*. The Creator of the Universe lovingly created each of us, and each one of us has rebelled against him – each one of us is guilty of cosmic treason against our Creator every time we sin. By any human standard, God has no business loving us. We are his enemies. And yet he has chosen to love us – and to die so that we can be reconciled to him.

Think of the story of the Sleeping Beauty. The brave Prince Charming charges to the castle, fighting his way through the magic brambles and thorns and past the giant dragon so that he can rescue the Sleeping Beauty with a kiss. It's an enchanting story of love. Or is it? What if you changed the story and replaced the Sleeping Beauty with the Sleeping Ugly? What if instead of a young and beautiful girl, the woman asleep in the castle was a hideous, wart-covered, old hag. Every guy wants to be Prince Charming charging in to rescue the Beauty and win her love and affection, but would you charge in to rescue the Sleeping ugly and win her love? We might all be willing to risk our lives for someone lovely, but imagine the most contemptible person you know. Would you risk your life for that man or woman? That's the question that shows us our own lack of *agape* – our lack of divine love. It's the question that ought to make us realise what Christ did for you and me. St. Paul tells us in Romans 5: 7-8, "It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person. It may even be that someone might dare to die for a good person. But God has shown us how much he loves us—it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!" (TEV). We were the Sleeping Uglies. We were the contemptible ones. We were the ones hideous to God because of our sin against

him, and yet he loved us and died for our sins. He took our place.

These same verses that tell us that Jesus Christ died for us while we were still sinners, also tell us that he died for us while we were helpless and without any strength – while we were *dead* in our sins. There was no possible way that any of us could ever have helped ourselves out of our condition. We weren't merely sick, we weren't mostly dead, but still partly alive – we were *dead*. We were in the spiritual morgue.

It's important that we grasp this, because you see, there are a lot of people out there that think that they can do something on their own initiative to find spiritual life. But that's not what Holy Scripture teaches us. The Bible tells us that without God's saving work through Jesus Christ, the natural and fallen man can't even understand the teachings of Jesus – they're foolishness. Jesus asked people like the scribes and Pharisees why his teachings weren't clear to them, and he explained why: "It is because you *cannot bear* to listen to my message" (John 8:43). We all have ears, but it's only those in whom the Holy Spirit is doing his work of regeneration that understanding is possible. Is it any wonder that so many reject or misunderstand and misapply these teachings of Jesus?

Jesus also warns us that the natural man or woman cannot receive the Holy Spirit. He told his disciples, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world *cannot* receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him" (John 14:16-17). No one can be saved by receiving the Spirit as an act of his own will.

But our problem is even worse than that. Scripture tells us that natural and unredeemed men and women can't even submit themselves to God's Law. In fact, St. Paul tells us that even though our wills are free, because of our fallen and sinful nature, we are unable to choose the good and are compelled to be rebels against God. In Romans 8:7 he writes, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is *hostile* to God, for it does *not* submit to God's law; indeed, *it cannot*."

Finally, lest we still somehow think that we can be even a little bit self-righteous. The Apostle Paul also tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is *not able* to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." The unredeemed and unregenerate *cannot* understand the truths of God. St. Peter writes that apart from Christ, every one of us has "eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin" (2 Peter 2:14).

The Bible doesn't paint a pretty picture of us. If you feel personally unedified by that image, if it makes you feel bad, if it makes you feel icky, and if it makes you feel terrible, good! That's the point. God's love has been measured by the fact that *while* we were sinners and were unable to hear his word, receive his Holy Spirit, submit to his Law, understand his teachings, or even to stop sinning, Christ died for us. That is the love of God! If we are ever to truly understand the depth of love that God has for us and has shown to us, we have to set aside every last vestige of self-righteousness and every false picture we have of ourselves as somehow meriting God's favour – even if it's only a little bit. This is God's love for us and it's this love that we're called as God's children to show to others – not just our friends, but to our enemies too. If you think on any level and to any degree that you can somehow merit God's love, you will never fully understand and appreciate the full depth of God's love for you – and if you can't understand it and appreciate it, you'll never be able to fully share it with others.

Is it possible? Can we do it? No, we can't – at least not in and of ourselves. This kind of love is only possible if the Lord Jesus is working in you. If you're not a Christian – if you're still trusting in yourself, even just a little bit – to get to heaven – you have to start by putting your faith and trust in Jesus to do it all for you and then by asking him to create that love in you. If you are a Christian, but are far from God, you have to draw near and ask him to work out his love in you.

Maybe you are a Christian and you are trying to walk closely with God, but this still seems impossible to you. I know that we all struggle with this sometimes. Let me make this distinction: *loving* is not

necessarily *liking*. Now listen, because I don't want you to misunderstand what I'm saying here. Liking someone means having emotional feelings towards them, but we can't always control our emotions. It's not always possible to have those feelings toward some people. Love, on the other hand, and contrary to popular belief, is not about feelings – it's a matter of the will. And so because love is about the will and not about our feelings, that makes it *always* possible to show love. You see, if Christ is in you, you can do that – even if you don't *feel* like it.

It wouldn't make much sense for Jesus to say, "Love your enemies" if he was talking about something that was based only on our feelings. We could never do it. But if love is a matter of the will, and if our wills are surrendered to Christ, we can do it. We can love our enemies. We can bless those who curse us. We can do good to those who hate us. We can pray for those who despitely use us and persecute us.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes, "The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. So do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.... The difference between a Christian and a worldly man is not that the worldly man has only affections or 'likings' and the Christian has only 'charity.' The worldly man treats certain people kindly because he 'likes' them; the Christian, trying to treat everyone kindly, finds himself liking more and more people as he goes on – including people he could not even have imagined himself liking at the beginning."

If you just can't seem to love your enemies, start here. Don't worry if the feelings aren't there; act like they were and see how God will lead you into a fuller experience of his great love.

As the Church we *have* to "get" this. We have to have a full understanding of God's love. As long as we still trust in ourselves for our salvation, even if only a little bit and thinking that we're not as vile and ugly as we really are to God, we can never know the true depth of God's love.

And how can we share the depth of God's love with others if we don't understand it ourselves. That's why, I think, we often try to evangelise people as a "project." We're still trying to earn brownie points with God. We pretend to show love to someone unlovable, but when they still fail to receive the Gospel we drop them and move onto someone else. That's not showing God's love – that's just us trying to merit God's love on our own.

Someone once said that there are actually *five* Gospels. There's the Gospel according to St. Matthew, the Gospel according to St. Mark, the Gospel according to St. Luke, the Gospel according to St. John, and the Gospel according to "St. You." How do men and women come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ? They come to know him as they see him in Holy Scripture and in your holy living – in you as you show and live divine love. You are the closest that many people will ever come to Jesus Christ and to the Gospel! If they don't see Christ's love in *you*, they will never see it.

In one of his books Henry Ironside paints a wonderful picture of living divine love. He writes of visiting a missionary hospital in Arizona where an elderly Navajo woman was being nursed back to health by a Christian doctor and some Navajo nurses. Her own people had cast her out because she was old and dying. She was found and taken to the hospital after several days of being exposed to the elements. After more than two months in the hospital, she started wondering about the care she was getting and asked one of the nurses, "I can't understand it. Why did the doctor do all that for me? He is a white man, and I am an Indian. I never heard of anything like this before."

The Navajo nurse, who was a Christian, said, "You know, it is the love of Christ that made him do that. She said, "Who is this Christ? Tell me more about him." The nurse called a missionary to explain the gospel. The staff started to pray. After a few weeks they asked the old woman, "Can you trust this Saviour, turn from the idols you have worshiped, and trust him as the Son of the Living God?" She thought about her answer, and as she was doing that the doctor walked into the room. Her face lit up and she said, "If Jesus is anything like the doctor, I can trust him forever." She came to the Lord

Jesus Christ and accepted him as her Saviour.

What reached her? It was love. But it wasn't man's love. It was God's love that she saw in a man. God's divine love! That's what Jesus is telling us that you and I are meant to show to an ungodly and rebellious world, and we are to do it as the sons and daughters of our Father so that others may come to faith in his redeeming Son.

Please pray with me: Loving Father, we give you thanks and praise for loving us when we were so unlovely. By the power of your Spirit, work in us so that we can understand the depth of your love and help us show that love to others in word and deed that others might see your Son at work in us and be drawn to your saving grace. We ask this through his Name. Amen.