



# HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

## Loving Your Neighbor

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Matthew 5:43-48

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*<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> 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. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

*(Pastor prays)*

Yesterday culminated a week of Operation Charlotte as hundreds of you gave yourselves to show the surrounding community that Hickory Grove not only loves Jesus, we also love our neighbors. Not with some sappy sentimental half affection that's more word than it is deed, but love that is in spirit and truth.

Thursday evening, I went between the clothes closet and the food pantry meeting hundreds of people who are our neighbors and having conversations with men and women about the goodness of God and the saving power of Jesus crucified for sinners.

“Operation Charlotte” is a week of intensely focused ministry that is designed to be a living reminder of what our everyday life is supposed to be. Jesus said that we are to be the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its saltiness it's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. He also said that we are to be the light of the world set on a hill that cannot be hidden. “Nor do people light a lamp and place it under a basket but on a stand that it may give light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light

shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven!" And after saying that, Jesus takes six well-known passages in the Bible to illustrate how dead religion has misused the living word and His teaching. This culminates in the passage about being a neighbor, and here He provides us with the most powerful teaching in the gospels about what it actually means to love.

Here is hardline, radical, real life Christianity. They used to call it "putting feet to your prayers." I'd just call it putting truth to your Christianity. It's not enough for us to just be nice to people who aren't Christians. It must be cross-centered, Gospel-saturated love. I think that's what Jesus was talking about in this passage. The religious leaders of the day were the Scribes and the Pharisees. They knew this scripture better than anyone, but they didn't know Gospel love. Their minds were filled with Bible verses but they were proud, prejudiced, judgmental and spiteful. They were hateful men and the Lord Jesus speaks right into the heart of their false religion and gives us the mandate of Gospel-powered, outward-focused love that must define our approach to reaching people for Christ. That is our mission, taking the Gospel to our neighbors.

### **Loving Our Neighbors Means Sharing the Gospel**

In this passage, I've pulled out three necessities of getting it.

#### **Get the Bible right.**

This, of course, has implications in about every area, as throughout history people have used the Bible to support anything from racism to homosexuality. And that's always the danger when the Bible isn't approached correctly and as a whole. And it's even more dangerous when people only use a portion of the Bible and either add to or subtract from what the Bible actually says. That seems to be the issue Jesus is addressing in verse 43. Let's read it.

<sup>43</sup> *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'* What Jesus has just quoted is partially true.

In Leviticus 19:18, it says "love your neighbor" in the Bible. But the "hate your enemy" part was evidently something the Scribes and Pharisees had added to the Bible in an effort to justify their own behavior. But a partial truth creates a whole lie and a convenient but empty religion. Just as an aside here, Biblically based false teaching is the worst kind of deception. Our biggest issue

isn't with Islam or agnosticism; our biggest issue is with knowing and living the whole counsel of God's word.

What the Pharisees had done is what people have done throughout history. They have made an addition and distortion to God's word to help justify their own prejudicial heart. Leviticus 19, where the Bible says, "love your neighbor," is addressed to the congregation of Israel and gives instructions on how to treat parents and brothers and neighbors, and nothing about strangers and enemies. And what they've done here is to distort the Bible enough to convince the racist that wants to be convinced, that my only real loyalty is to my own people and that's anti-Gospel and anti-Jesus. If you are going to get loving your neighbor right, we've got to get the Bible right. Teaching the correct Gospel is our responsibility we must invest and invite our neighbors.

### **Learn what it means to love**

Pay attention to what Jesus does here in verse 44. He takes their insular, *status quo* religion in verse 43 and turns it on its head. Here is being a Gospel neighbor. Look what he says in verse 44: "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Here is radical and real Christianity. To love an enemy is to have a love that is a generous, warm, costly, self-sacrifice for another's good. It's to desire the best for someone who hates you. It's love for people who are not like you, don't look like you, don't believe like you. It's an indiscriminating kind of love for an enemy. It's love, not in a sentimental feeling, but it's an earnest desire for good. It's coupled with another phrase in verse 44, to pray for those who persecute you.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who stood against the Nazi regime and was finally executed for it, came to America and was radically changed when he went to the black church. Some say that's where he was genuinely converted. He said that verse 44 is the supreme command, that through the medium of prayer, we go to our enemy and stand by his side and plead to God for him. Think of the Lord Jesus, hanging on the cross, praying for His tormentor while the iron spikes were being driven into His hands and feet: "Father forgive them." Let's us not complain of how we are treated by those who don't like us. If the torture of crucifixion could not silence our Lord's prayers for His enemy, then what pain or what pride or what prejudice or what laziness and selfishness could justify the silence of our love and prayers for people who need the Gospel?

We show love for people in three primary ways: deeds, words and prayers.

Deeds. Here is Operation Charlotte. Here is car care and clothes closet. Here is food pantry and Hearts and Hammers and Love Life. Here is doing something. It is a ministry of mercy. The Gospel rides on the cart of deeds and leads to words.

Words. God gave you a mouth to use for His glory, not to run others down but to lift Christ up. And our ministry is not only motivated by the Gospel, it always comes back to the Gospel. We hand out food at the food pantry so we can tell people that Jesus is the bread of life. We give away clothes at the clothes closet so people can hear that Christ will throw away their filthy rags and clothe them in righteousness. That is deeds and words.

Prayer. You don't have to be a theologian to pray. You just have to be a child of God redeemed by the blood of Jesus. If that's you, then this passage is yours. Pray for those who hate who you are and what you believe and watch God work. Loving your neighbors means sharing the Gospel, but first you have to get the Bible right and learn what it means to love.

### **Get a grip on grace**

So now we follow the sequence. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. And verse 45 says, "so that you may be sons of your Father in Heaven." We do these things not to get sonship; we do these things as a reflection of the Father to show that we have been changed by Jesus. Listen to the rest of verse 45 where Jesus describes common grace. Notice the "his sun." *For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.* Here, in the form of common grace, is God's love for all people, even those who hate Him and His church. And when we show Gospel love, it identifies us as Christians.

We are children of God. Not only that, verses 46-47 tell us how being Gospel people sets us against others. In verses 46 and 47, Jesus basically says the same thing twice. *For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?* You get the point. Almost all people look after their own. The true test of Christianity is how you as a believer in Jesus treat someone you would otherwise not like or go out of your way to avoid. And the question Jesus asked down in verse 47 is a haunting one. What more are you doing than others? What lengths are you willing to go to expand your Gospel-driven love for people who are not like you? What hurdles of race and

culture are you willing to jump over to love with a Gospel-driven, cross-centered kind of love? Isn't that what Jesus is getting at in verse 48 when He says you must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect? Of course we know that's impossible. And that's the point as we see our inability, we turn to the One who is perfect on our behalf.

Jesus Christ lived perfectly, died sacrificially, rose victoriously and reigns eternally. And He calls us to love our neighbors by sharing the Gospel. But to do that we have to get the Bible right, learn what it means to love and get a grip on grace, the kind of grace found at the cross.

*(Pastor prays)*