

Salt Life
Part Three: How to love those who don't act like us
Matthew 5.43-48

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This is why we're starting the year with a month long sermon series called Salt Life. Because we think it's likely that we'll see more and more of this.



And we believe that the Jesus we follow wants something different. We believe he wants to see more and more of this.



Jesus says in Matthew 5.13, "You are the salt of the earth."

Salt was used as a preservative in the ancient world, and that's the primary way the church has thought about what it means for us to be salt: to stop the spread of corruption and moral rot.

But the church has long overlooked the fact that salt was perhaps even better understood as an ancient metaphor for hospitality, for turning strangers into friends and family by sharing a meal with them around your table and sharing with them that which was most valuable to you.

In Mark 9.50 Jesus tells us to have salt between ourselves inside the church, that is, to live at *peace* with one another.

And in Colossians 4.6 Paul tells us to season our conversation with salt as we interact with those outside the church, that is, to interact with them with *grace*.

That's what it means to live a salt life.

Today we're diving into the third of our themes, which is how to love those who don't act like us. Or, to widen it out, how to love those who are unloving toward us or unloving toward God.

Our passage for today is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is found in Matthew's gospel, chapter 5.43-48.

Here's why this particular passage is so important. It's the same reason that, during the first three hundred years of the church, this verse was the one that more people memorized, and this was the verse that more pastors taught on, than any other.

Just over four years ago, at the end of a prayerful six month discernment process, the session and staff came to you with the sense that God was calling us as a church to learn together what it means to live a life of love, to use Paul's phrase from Ephesians 5.2.

More than that, to be known in our community more for our love than for anything else.

We believed God was calling us to live in such a way that the people who sit in the desk next to us at school or who work in the office across from ours at work or live in the house or apartment next door in our neighborhood will know us for our love more than for anything else, as we seek to love Jesus, love his people, and pour out his love on the world.

And that sense of calling raised really challenging questions for a number of us.

What do we mean exactly when we talk about loving those God has placed around us? How far do we go? Where are the lines? When does loving sinners become condoning sin? What if someone is evil? Aren't there limits to love? When should the whole love project stop and the truth telling start?

I believe the passage we're looking at today goes a long way toward answering those questions.

Matthew 5.43-48. Let's walk through it and make sure we're clear about what it says, and see if we can't answer some of these really challenging questions.

Jesus says, in **Matthew 5.43**

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

Jesus is teaching a huge crowd of people in the hills alongside the Sea of Galilee, introducing his teaching about the kingdom of God to them.

Often in his teaching Jesus quotes the Old Testament scriptures. Whenever he does, he introduces it by saying, “The Scripture says” or “Isaiah says” or “it says.”

But here he says, “You have heard it was said.” Clearly Jesus is pointing to something other than Scripture here.

The interesting thing, though, is that the first part of this phrase, “Love your neighbor,” actually comes straight from the Bible. You find it in Leviticus 19.18. Later in the gospel of Matthew, in chapter 22, we’ll find out just how important that passage is for Jesus.

So the first clause is found in the Bible. But since the time it was written fifteen hundred years before, the meaning of the passage has drifted. By the time of Jesus the Jews have narrowed the meaning of the word “neighbor” into something closer to “our own people.” Later on in his teaching, in Luke 10, Jesus will make sure they get a clearer picture of who their neighbor really is.

So the first clause, even if its meaning has been narrowed, is found in the Bible. But that second clause, “hate your enemy,” it isn’t found anywhere in the Scriptures. We’re told to hate *evil*, such as in Amos 5.15 and Psalm 97.10, but never to hate our *enemy*.

So over time the call to love neighbor had been whittled down into a sort of special category of people who should be loved, and by implication, it also came to be understood as permission not to have the same regard for those who weren’t our own people, especially for those who were rude or hostile toward us.

Those people we should hate – the word means putting them in a separate category and treating them differently, pushing them away, whether by actively hating them or simply by being indifferent to them, treating them as though they don’t matter to us or to God, not like those we like and those who like us.

So what Jesus is picking up and examining here is a scrap of spiritual wisdom that sounds like scripture . . . but isn’t. Instead, it’s like a callus that has grown over one of the most important laws in the Old Testament, hardening into a posture that says loving our neighbor is conditioned on their being worthy of our love.

But if there’s hostility between us? If they have wronged us or someone we love? Well then, we’re off the hook, and we can treat them in return with anything ranging from indifference to hostility.

Jesus calls his followers to something different. Something really, really different.

Matthew 5.43-44

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

"But I tell you." Jesus doesn't quote some outside authority. He speaks with his own unique authority as the divine incarnate promised king who has come from on high.

"This isn't my suggestion. It's my command. You call me king. Do what I command."

An *enemy* is someone who is hostile toward us. Love them. That is, don't see them through the lens of how they see you and treat you. See them with reference to God, as men and women created in God's image, and treat them accordingly.

A person who *persecutes* us is someone who makes life difficult for us, someone who has it out for us. Pray for them. That is, ask and seek God's best for them. Invite God's blessing on them. And be part of that blessing you pray for.

Jesus says there may well be two different ways others relate to us: some treating us with respect and making life a pleasure, others treating us with hostility and making life hard for us, but there can't be two different ways we relate to them. We are called to love them all.

Now he goes on and tells us why we can't put people in two categories, those we love and those we don't.

Matthew 5.44-45

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Why should we love all indiscriminately? Because when we act that way, we are acting like the Father whose children we are. And when we do that, we give the world a picture of what God is like, which turns out to be one of the most important aspects of our calling as followers of Christ. To put the loving character of God on display. Jesus says people should be able to learn about the God we love by watching the way we live.

He doesn't say try to imitate God. He says be who you are. In John 1.11-12, it says, "to all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, Jesus gives the right to become children of God."

The Christian life isn't about us trying hard to be like God. It is about our life starting over, with a new birth, from the inside out, as God places his Spirit within us. We are

born into the family of God, and as we grow and mature, more and more we will bear a resemblance to our heavenly father. And nowhere will that be more evident than in the way we respond to those who are hostile to us and make life hard for us.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

That is the reason Jesus commands us to love all equally: both those who are pleasant to us and who make life a joy for us, and those who are hostile to us and have it out for us. To put the love of God on display.

In what way exactly? How are we called to be like God? What is the quality of his father's love that Jesus wants us to imitate in dealing with our enemies?

We might be tempted to think that we are called to imitate the way God gave the smack down to his enemies in the Old Testament. Be offended, as your father in heaven is offended. But Jesus goes a completely different direction. Here's how you show yourself children of your heavenly father:

He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Think about the role of the sun and the rain in a culture that depends on crops and herds for food. The sun and the rain are utterly vital for life. They meet a person's deepest needs. Without them, nothing would grow, and life would be impossible.

In love, God lets us sun shine down on and his rain wash over those who are bad and those who are good alike.

Notice that the love of God isn't blind to wrongdoing. It's clear in this passage that some people live in a way that is an offense to God and he sees it and knows it. This isn't about being blind.

Evil refers to everything on the spectrum from annoying to wicked. And *unrighteous* means wronging other people, failing to treat them right. God is not saying that love means we should close our eyes and lay down our moral standards. Jesus acknowledges that there are some we will encounter who fit in the category of good and righteous, and others who will fall into the category of evil or unrighteous.

But when it comes to a life-giving generosity, to seeing and meeting needs, God doesn't hold back from the undeserving. Not in the least. He generously gives them what gives them life.

And this isn't just passive spillover from the care God is providing for the good and deserving who live nearby, like a sprinkler that inadvertently waters a neighbor's yard while watering yours.

In his generosity God moves toward those who are bad, those who do wrong, and provides for their needs. The language of intentionality is clear.

God *causes* his sun to rise on them
 God *sends* rain on them

This is the same heart posture we find in Jeremiah 29.7, where it says that God's people in exile are to *actively seek* the welfare of the people God places around them.

This is what Jesus invites us and commands us to do. To love all indiscriminately.

He doesn't say love *when*, or love *if*, or love *until*, or love *unless*. He just says to love.

And by this point we have begun to flesh out three different dimensions of what real love includes, whether it be love for our neighbor or for our enemy.

Notice it doesn't have anything with to do with feelings. Biblical love isn't a windsock that blows with the prevailing winds of emotion.

Love is a choice.

A choice to see the other person with reference to God, as someone created in his image and therefore deserving of our regard.

A choice to seek God's best for them, and to be part of the answer to that prayer.

And a choice to move toward them with indiscriminate generosity, responding to needs rather than responding to how we've been treated, even when it costs us.

Why do we love this way? Not because it's guaranteed to make things better with those who are at odds with us. It may. And it may not. I'm batting about 50/50 in that regard.

Only one reason. So we'll look like our dad. So we'll put the heart of our heavenly father on display. Like father like son.

As Mark Labberton said last Sunday, "We follow an enemy-loving God. You are my enemy. I'm called to love you."

Not convinced God is an enemy-loving God?

Exhibit A: me. I was a rather obnoxious atheist when God began his loving pursuit of me and drew me to himself.

Exhibit B: the rest of you, all of us with a similar story.

Romans 5.8 and 5.10

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.

As long as we think of ourselves as the righteous offended ones being mistreated by the unrighteous offensive ones, we will struggle to love those who wrong us. It is only when we recognize that we are on equal footing with every human being as ones who wrong others, and see that we are all equally in need of God's forgiveness, and equally recipients of his grace through Christ, it's only then that we are set free to love all equally.

I've been reading Leo Tolstoy's book, *Resurrection*, about a man who is seeking to put right the many wrongs that he committed earlier in his life. At one point, he is trying to help a woman he has deeply wronged and she is rude to him and rejects his help and continues to make choices that he finds offensive.

He stood behind her, silently looking at her back.

He could not remember which came first; did pity for her first enter his heart, or did he first remember his own sins – his own repulsive actions, the very same for which he was condemning her? Anyhow, he both felt himself guilty and pitied her. . . .

The thought that he had forgiven her heightened his feelings of pity and tenderness for her, and he wished to comfort her. . . .

Nekhlyudov took leave, and went out with such peace, joy, and love toward everybody in his heart as he had never felt before. The certainty that no action of Maslova's could change his love for her filled him with joy, and raised him to a height which he had never before attained. Let her [wrong him], that was her affair. He loved her not for his own [sake], but for her sake and for God's. (335)

Jesus goes on.

Matthew 5.46-47

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Jesus takes the two groups that a typical Jewish person of his day would have seen as being at the bottom rung of the moral ladder:

The tax collectors – those Jews who not only collaborated with the hated Roman occupiers but also enriched themselves at the expense of their fellow Jews – and the pagans or Gentiles – the non-Jews who the Jews tended to lump together as being unholy and offensive to God.

Jesus asks:

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? [Or as another translation puts it, “What credit is that to you?” (JBP)] Are not even the tax collectors, who you think so little of, doing that much?

And Jesus asks,

And if you greet or bless only your own people, what are you doing more than others? [Or as another translation asks, “What is unusual about that?” (NABRE)] Do not even pagans, who you despise, do that?

I'll never forget the trip that Mark Bleyer and I took to Nepal where I did a Seminary in a Suitcase.

We were there not long after a huge earthquake had come through and caused horrible devastation. We drove through some of that wreckage and up into some of the villages. The villagers told us that after the earthquake, no Muslims came to any of the villages, not even to help fellow Muslims. Hindu priests came, but only to care for fellow Hindus, but even then they always charged them for the sacrifices they offered.

But the Christians went from village to village, bringing supplies and giving them away indiscriminately, caring for whoever had a need. As a result, hundreds of Hindus and Muslims became followers of Jesus.

Taking care of “our own” comes naturally. But Jesus calls us to something more.

Matthew 5.48

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This whole passage was hard enough before we got to this point. Now it seems impossible.

Oh, really, that's all you're asking of me? Be perfect like God?

But this isn't an impossible standard he is hanging over our heads. It's an invitation. Here's why I say that.

This word *perfect* is the Greek word *teleios*. It's a word that means:

Mature rather than young and undeveloped
 Expert rather than still learning
 Complete rather than still missing something
 And perfect rather than falling short of a standard.

When you know that about this word, suddenly this closing comment by Jesus makes sense, and we can hear it as the invitation it is meant to be.

In the verses just before this one, Jesus says, loving those who love you is only *part* what it means to love. That's the natural part. It's good that you're loving some. But that's an incomplete, or immature, or imperfect way of thinking about what it means to love.

Instead, we are called, in obedience to our king, and in imitation of him, to see it the rest of the way through, to finish what is only part way done, and to have a complete and mature love, a love for all, rather than an incomplete and immature love, loving only those who love us.

That's when our love will become something unusual, something supernatural, something out of the ordinary and worth paying attention to in this give-what-you-get world of ours.

This isn't all on us. We are God's children. He is making us new. This is the work we can expect to see God doing in our hearts as we grow in Christ.

We won't ever do it perfectly, but we can do it well, and each day we can do it better. And when we do, God helping us, we will hold before the world a taste of the Father's love that is unlike anything they've seen before.

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One of the things that makes this invitation from Jesus so hard to do is the gripping power, the tyranny, of our feelings.

Jesus calls us to live a life of love. Yes, but what about when someone *really* wrongs you? What about when someone wrongs someone you love? And what about when someone wrongs and offends God?

On an emotional level, everything in us wants to give back to others whatever it is they are dishing out to us. It's that oh-yeah? kind of justice reflex in all of us. Somebody at school rejects you. Someone at work wrongs you. Someone in your neighborhood is rude to you.

When someone is hostile to us, when someone seems bent to make life difficult for us, or when someone says something or does something that we think is an offense to God, justice rears up and seems to demand some sort of eye-for-an-eye response. Our feelings tell us that's the appropriate response – to pull back and to push away.

We let the other person's way of treating us or those we love be the Lord of our response. You did this to me, therefore this is how I must relate to you.

Jesus says, "No, actually, I'm the Lord. Not your feelings. And I say love your enemies."

For the past generation or two, the evangelical church has increasingly seen truth and love as two separate modes of being, like separate weapons that we deploy in different situations. Either I love you or I speak the truth to you.

But according to Jesus, we are never given permission to stop loving the person who has wronged us or wronged God. Speak the truth, yes, but don't stop loving. Speak it in love.

It's human nature to base our giving on our getting. To love those who love us. To pull back from those who pull back from us. To be cold to those who are cold to us.

But Jesus calls us to something more.

Years ago, a friend of mine who was in leadership in the church began to sour on me as a pastor, and he began actively undermining whatever I was trying to accomplish. When I asked him why he was doing that, he told me he had decided I was incompetent and couldn't be trusted, and that he would do whatever he could to get me out of the church. Then he cut off our friendship, and when he came to church he made a point of sitting behind someone else so he wouldn't have to look at me. It was, as you can imagine, really painful.

But God put it on my heart to pray for him every day, to thank God for him and for his presence in my life, painful though that was, and to ask God's blessing on him in spite of my hurt.

And because of that, whenever I ran into him, I would feel genuine gladness in seeing him. I would walk up to him and greet him, in spite of his stiffening up and looking away. He viewed me with hostility and was making my life painfully difficult, but by praying for him each day God helped me to see him as someone God loved, and someone he wanted me to love as well.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

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What is a situation you face right now where someone is hostile toward you, or has set about to make your life difficult? Or maybe someone you see as hostile toward God?

What would it look like to choose to see that person with reference to God, as someone created in God's image and therefore deserving of your regard?

What might it look like to bless that person and seek God's best for them, and to be part of the answer to that prayer?

What might it mean to move toward them with a heart of generosity, responding to their needs rather than responding to how you've been treated?

Jesus says: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute