



Study Series

Follow Me: Week Four AM

The ethic of love: Marc Rader

What is the Law?: Insert on page 4

Bible

Matthew 5:43-48 (NIV)

Love for Enemies

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy!'

44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** 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. **46** If you

love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? **47** And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? **48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Sermon Summary

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus begins a section in the Sermon on the Mount focused on the kind of life that is required of those who follow Him. It is summarised in two statements. The first is in 5:20, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven", and the second in 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In between Jesus gives a series of examples of what He means. Each of them follow the same pattern: Jesus quotes the Law from the Old Testament, and then reflects on the resulting heart issue. For example, in 5:21-22 Jesus points out that we cannot really say we fulfil the command not to murder if our hearts are filled with rage, which is the source of murder. Likewise, in 5:27-28 avoiding adultery is not enough if our hearts are filled with lust. In 5:43-48, the last example from this section, Jesus says it is not enough to love those who love us if our hearts are filled with hatred. Referencing Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbour", Jesus calls us to love those who we might see as our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us.

What we are called to is an alignment of our heart and actions. When we love those who love us, we do so in an unconscious manner; we don't just stick to rules in our relationships, but seek the best for those we love almost naturally. The purpose of the law is to promote this kind of 'lawlessness;' when our relationship with God no longer requires the law, but we live the right way naturally. This is what Jesus calls us to; to love even those who hate us as naturally as we love those who love us. Now, the precise way we love our enemies will differ from how we love our friends; but we can seek to protect their reputation, avoid speaking ill of them, seeking to be kind in our words and deeds, forgiving quickly as we do with our friends, and so on. In doing so, Jesus says, we will be identified as God's children.

There appear to be two resulting implications for following Jesus. First, this is the kind of life we are called to; where our hearts are aligned totally to the will of God. A life where we no longer harbour anger, lust, or hatred in our hearts. This should be our desire and aim. However, it leads into the second implication which is simply that we cannot live up to this ideal. Instead of jumping right to the good news that by faith we share in Jesus' righteousness, can I urge you to sit with this tension of our inability. By jumping too quickly to the good news we can forget why we need it. Matthew doesn't "solve" this in chapter 5 either, but adds this to the overall tension that drives his story forward. The good news is coming, let us hunger and thirst for it.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: Describe a time where the choice to love another has been painful or costly. How did this make you feel? What emotions were stirred up in you? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 5:43-48 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain **why** they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. Our 'enemies' come in many forms, from those who undermine or belittle us, to those who seek to cause physical harm. Deeper than the surface offence we might experience, what is at the heart of the difficulty of loving our enemies?
4. Even just being kind to those we don't like, can come from a place of duty or obligation. How does this fall short of what Jesus calls us to? What does this begin to highlight about our relationship with Jesus?
5. How does sitting with the tension of not jumping to the good news make you feel? Do you struggle with a sense of self condemnation? Or is this a helpful exercise for cultivating thankfulness?
6. How might we begin to overcome the challenges described in our reflections on question 3? What might help to align our hearts with God's; to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?

Prayer

Whilst we sit with the tension of the good news to come, we are still being invited to follow Jesus more and more faithfully. Take some time to pray for each other, and in particular, consider each other's responses to question 6. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you into practices that increase our ability to love our enemies.

What is the Law?

This series, and indeed, Matthew's gospel, continually invite us to reflect on the Law. The following insert is designed to briefly help us engage with what that term describes.

The relationship of Christians with the Law in the Old Testament is often a little strained. The central issue is application. Why is it that some laws are regarded as permanently valid while others have been set aside? And what do we do with those sections of the Law that really have been superseded? Some of these questions are relatively simple. The sacrificial regulations, for instance, have been superseded by the sacrifice of Jesus. More difficult are those aspects of the Law that Jesus radically reinterpreted such as the clean and unclean food laws. And more difficult still are those that seem to have been set aside by social change such as the Sabbath regulations.

The Law, as a whole, was meant to describe what a relationship with God looked like. This had implications for every aspect of life; there was nothing that was exempt. This is demonstrated in Leviticus 19, for instance, where regulations about worship are included alongside regulations about agriculture and horticulture, sexuality, the treatment of the elderly, business practices, and even fashion (e.g., hair cuts, garments, and tattoos). This has not changed. Every single area of our lives should be impacted by our relationship with God, and the Law continues to provide a contextual portrait of what this looks like. What we mean by a contextual portrait, is that the Law was set in the ancient near east and would have made a lot more sense then than it often does today. The principles, however, are clear. For example, the regulations about what to do with a bull that gores someone may not have a one-to-one relationship to anything we experience, but the principle of responsibility is one that we can grapple with.

The other aspect of the Law that is important to note is that it was given in order that it might not be necessary. If the Law had been internalised by the people of Israel the Law would have ceased to be necessary. Law-less living – where the Law wasn't necessary – is the aim of the Law. This is what Jesus has come to make possible for us; that through His Spirit we might be changed into people who no longer need the Law but who live out our relationship with God as second nature.

The question about applying the Law to today then, has a couple of answers to it. First, what is the principle that the regulations illustrate and how can we apply that. Second, what difference does Jesus make to how we understand the regulations? Jesus affirms what we might call the spirit of the Law; the essence of what relationship with God looks like and this can take a very different shape than in the Old Testament. One example of

this are the regulations about tithing. In the Old Testament the people of God were to give a tenth (and maybe more depending on how you read the regulations) to the Lord. In the New Testament Jesus affirms the principle of giving but without reference to the tithe. It seems that Jesus sets us free to be generous rather than contained, limited, or burdened by the tithe. Generosity is a much higher standard that fulfils the Law. This may also be where the Sabbath needs to be considered. The principle of rest is an important one and one that we are not very good at keeping, but Jesus reminds us that the Sabbath was made for humanity, rather than the other way around. We need rest because of how we have been created, but how we observe this is another matter and, like generosity, is a harder one to apply than a observing a sacred day.

This is not a simple issue, but one that is good to grapple with and we hope this clarifies some of what we are dealing with when we engage with the Law.