

Sermon on the Mount

August 17, 2014

Title: Sunny With a Chance of Showers

Text: Matthew 5:43-48

Summary: Who is your neighbor? Who deserves your love and respect? Who gets to make that choice: you or the God who created you and everyone else?

Whose Neighbor?

"Love your neighbor!"

In one of the earliest statements of God's Law for His people Israel we find a series of commands designed to help God's people get along with each other so that they could inherit the Promised Land. The list concludes with these words:

Leviticus 19:17-18 NIV

“Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”

Notice three things:

#1: These commands define *neighbor* as a fellow member of Israel.

#2: These commands presume that things can go wrong between *neighbors*, and when they do, they must be addressed in a straightforward way.

#3: No matter what happens or how wrong someone may have acted, there is no place for holding a grudge, seeking revenge, or harboring hatred against a *neighbor*.

"Don't hate."

"Don't condone bad behavior."

"Don't get even."

"Don't hold grudges."

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

These commands sum up how God's People -- God's Family -- is to operate, even when things go wrong in the family.

We probably have similar expectations within our own circle of family and friends -- the people we would consider true *neighbors*.

But what about all the other people out there? How are we supposed to treat them?

"But I tell you..."

Using the word *neighbor* suggests that there will also be a large portion of the human race that is not part of our *neighborhood*. Certainly, for the Jewish people of Jesus' time the notion of *neighbor* applied only to those who were fellow Jews. Everyone else was considered in some sense or another *non-neighbor*. They were pagans, outsiders, unclean, unacceptable. Gentiles. They were the *enemy*.

So imagine how troubling it must have been to hear Jesus say:

Matthew 5:43-45 NIV

"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, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

Here was a Jewish rabbi telling His followers to extend to outsiders and enemies the same love and respect that they were expected to show to each other. For people living under Roman oppression and surrounded by pagan corruption, the only thing holding them together was the special treatment they afforded each other as *neighbors*. Now this rabbi was expanding the *neighbor* category to include the rest of the human race!

Whose Neighbor?

We face the same issue today: Who is our neighbor? Our brains automatically sort everyone we meet into one of two categories: Friend or Foe. And guess which is the default category? Every stranger you meet on the street is identified as Foe unless proven otherwise. Which means that the very idea of someone being a *neighbor* means that we have decided that they are not a threat. They are in the Friend category.

And when people do things to us or say things about us that are unkind or hurtful, you can be sure that they get identified as Foe, not *Neighbor*! It may be that family member who never gives you a break. It may be that person at work who is always out to get under your skin. It may be a group of people in our society with radically different values and ideas. Whatever the case, our first instinct will be the opposite of loving them!

But Jesus redefines the categories: "But I tell you, love your enemies...."

Sunny with a chance of showers

Jesus' weather report:

So why would we go to all the trouble of seeing an enemy as if he or she were a neighbor to be loved and prayed for? Jesus provides a simple, but compelling answer:

Matthew 5:45b NIV

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

Jesus reminds us that the Creator who sustains the world sees every human being as a person made in His image. There is no distinction. Jesus uses something as familiar as the weather to make his point: God causes the sun to shine on the entire world and all of its inhabitants. He doesn't black out the sun to punish or exclude any particular race or ethnic group. If you live where the sun comes up, it will shine on you.

The same is true with the rain. Rain was a vital for people living in the semi-arid Middle East. No rain, no crops. Should the rain fail to arrive, the entire region would be plunged into prolonged famine and suffering. Jesus points out that when God sends rain, He doesn't cause it to only fall on the fields of the good people. No, it falls on everyone's fields, whether they are good or bad, Jew or Gentile.

Every human being is made in God's image, no matter their religion, language or ethnicity. Every human being is of infinite value to the Creator who made him or her. God makes no distinction. "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

End of story.

False distinctions:

Jesus goes on to attack the false distinctions that we all make between Friend and Foe:

Matthew 5:46-47 NIV

"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?"

There it is: Friend vs. Foe. I love people who love me. I greet people who belong to my tribe. Isn't that the way the world works? The answer, of course, is Yes! That's the way a broken, dangerous world always works. You find out who is safe, who will take care of you, whom you can trust. Then you stick with them. Everyone else gets sorted into the Foe category.

Jesus challenges us to a higher standard. Instead of functioning within the defensiveness and mistrustfulness of a broken world, He dares us to act like "children of our Father in heaven." He dares us to see people the way God sees them -- even when

they are hostile or unloving. Even when they qualify as "enemies." We're to love them and pray for them when they persecute us. We're to remind ourselves that they, like us, are created in God's Image.

God's Witness:

On their first missionary venture Paul and his partner Barnabas found themselves being mistaken for Greek gods. They had performed a miracle of healing in the town of Lystra in what is now southern Turkey. When the populace turned out to worship them, Paul made an impassioned plea that they come to know and worship the one true God, the Creator of them all:

Acts 14:15-17 NIV

“Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”

The living God, the Creator, bears witness to Himself through His sunshine and rain. And those blessings are poured out indiscriminately upon the entire human race, even though the Gentile ethnic groups had not as yet acknowledged Him. No matter: God shows kindness to all. Why? Because every person is made to be His reflection.

New Creation/New Humanity

New Creation People:

We are called to be God's New Creation People. Our identity is not anchored in any one ethnic or cultural group. No longer are God's People defined by a unique culture or language. God is calling the entire human race to be His people. In his vision of God's throne room John tells us that Jesus purchased God's New Humanity through His death on the cross:

Revelation 5:9 NIV

And they sang a new song, saying:

**“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.”**

We are all one Tribe: Jesus' Tribe.

Frienemies:

This raises some important questions, of course. It's one thing to love a friend who loves us in return. But what about that enemy? Are we being told to just let someone walk all over us? Are we supposed to turn a blind eye on acts of violence and evil? What does it mean to love an enemy, or to pray for a persecutor. These are very real issues for Christians in Iraq who face imminent death at the hands of ISIS radicals.

At least a part of the answer to this question can be found back in Leviticus where we started this morning. Moses did not shy away from the reality that people do bad things to each other. That's why he said:

Leviticus 19:17-18 NIV

“Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”

People will do things that will make you want to hate them.

People will do things that will make you want to get even, or worse.

People will do things that will make you want to carry a grudge for years.

People will do bad things and try to get you to go along with them, making you an accomplice in their sin and guilt.

God's commands were designed to address the evil so that it could be dealt with. God commanded his people to have healthy boundaries: "Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt." God anticipated people doing such terrible things to each other that the natural reaction would be to hate, to seek revenge, or to bear a life-long grudge.

But God had commanded a different path: when bad things happened, they were to refuse to let hate, revenge and grudges take root in their hearts. They were to refuse to sink to the level of the evil around them. They were to respond with God's love.

"...but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

This is the only way that we move forward in a messy and broken world. This is the only way that we become more like the God's whose reflection we bear. And when we do, we fulfill the final command that Jesus gives us in this passage:

Matthew 5:48 NIV

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

We become true and complete reflections of the One who made us, loves us and sets us free.

So, who is your neighbor?