

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

AN ANALYSIS OF MATTHEW 5: 43-48

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by

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INTRODUCTION ¹

Matthew 5:43-48 contains the teaching of Jesus about what it means to love others as God loves us. Traditional thought supports the idea that the apostle Matthew wrote this book. A problem with this view is that the writer of Matthew relied greatly on the writings of Mark² According to William Barclay, “scholars agree that the first Gospel was not written by the apostle Matthew.”³ According to the ancient historian Papias, Matthew collected the logia or sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew tongue.⁴ However, if the author of this Gospel was one of the original apostles, the account would probably not contain about ninety percent of the same subject matter as Mark written in language that is very close to that used in Mark.⁵

The date and place of the writing of these scriptures is not known with certainty. One view suggests that Matthew was written after the Jewish Christians were expelled from the

¹ This document was typed using Microsoft Office Word 2000. The printer used to print a copy of the document was a Hewlett Packard DeskJet 682C.

² Elwyn L. Tilden. “Introduction to Matthew,” in The New Oxford Annotated Bible. eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1991,1994), nt: 1.

³ William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew, The Daily Study Bible. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), xxi.

⁴ Barclay, Matthew, xxi.

⁵The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. “The Gospel According to Matthew”

Synagogue about 85 or 90 C.E.⁶ Another view is that the Gospel was written “some years after the first Jewish-Roman War (A.D. 66-70).”⁷ Because the Gospel contains both Jewish and Gentile aspects, a possible location of the writing may have been Antioch in Syria where there was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile influences.⁸ Because of the mixing of Jews and Gentiles in Antioch, there would have been abundant questions about the Law and the Gospel teachings.⁹ According to one source, the intended audience for these writings was the Jewish-Gentile church. Between the years of 70 to 90 C.E., the Christian church was become more Gentile. The message sent by the writer of Matthew to both Jews and Gentiles was that Jesus was the Christ that fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and that true Judaism was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and not in the Law as interpreted by the Pharisees.¹⁰

Matthew 5:43-48 is from the New Testament book of Matthew that falls under the broad genre of Gospel. The Gospel is a literary form that tells the story of Jesus’ life, his teachings, and his death. Matthew 5:43-48 is of the sub-genre of Sayings Material as Logia. The Gospel of Matthew presents the sayings of Jesus in discourses and narratives. This scripture passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7), the first major discourse. This passage is the final of six antitheses (Mt. 5: 21-48) contained in the Sermon on the Mount. Antitheses are a se

⁶ Tilden, “Introduction,” NOSB: nt, 1

⁷ Frank Stagg, “Matthew,” in The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol.8, gen. ed. Clifton J. Allen. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 61.

⁸ Harper’s Bible Dictionary, s.v., “The Gospel According to Matthew.”

⁹ John L. McKenzie, “Matthew,” in The Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. Raymond E. Brown, SS., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 65.

¹⁰ Stagg, “Matthew,” 61.

ries of rhetorical statements in which Jesus contrasts opposing ideas in similar or parallel verb forms.¹¹ In this case, Jesus contrasts the command to love one's neighbor (Lev. 19:28) and the assumption that it is permissible to hate one's enemy (v.43) to his teaching in verse 44 to love one's enemy. The verbs "love" and "hate" in verse 43 parallel the verbs "love" and "pray" in verse 44. It is important to note that the six antitheses contained in the Sermon on the Mount are not meant to replace Mosaic Law, but to give the Law a fuller meaning.¹²

¹¹Stephen L. Harris, The New Testament: A Student's Introduction, 3rd ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999), 142-143.

¹²Stagg, "Matthew," 108

THE NEW LAW OF LOVE, 5:43-48

In the six antitheses contained in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave new meaning to the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament. In the first five, he addressed the Laws on murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, and revenge.¹³ In the sixth, Matthew 5:43-48, he taught the meaning of God's love. As Jesus stated in verse 17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."¹⁴ Jesus did not intend for believers to disregard the Old Testament Commandments. He did want believers to understand how God expects Christians to relate with all people. The teaching about love contained in verses 43 through 48 was so opposite of the Law as interpreted by the Pharisees and other religious leaders, that it was, in effect, a new Law of Love.

Love for Enemies, 5:43-44

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."

You have heard that it was said, is stated in both the New International Version¹⁵

¹³ Mt. 5:21-42 NIV.

¹⁴ Mt. 5:17 NIV.

¹⁵ Mt. 5:43 NIV.

and the New American Standard Bible.¹⁶ The New Living Bible¹⁷ states **You have heard the Law of Moses says**, and the Barclay¹⁸ translation states, **You know that the Law states**. Both these versions are more specific as to where the words to follow were said. The command to **“love your neighbor,”**¹⁹ is included in Mosaic Law. However, the Old Testament does not include scripture that commands “hatred for enemies.”²⁰ The Old Testament does contain passages that refer to hostility and aggression against enemies. Hatred was common to the Jewish religion.²¹ The various Jewish sects often treated each other “with hatred and hostility.”²²

A key to understanding these two verses lies in how the word “neighbor” would have been defined in Jesus’ day. One view suggests that a Jewish person in that day would have understood the word to mean another Jew. In addition, a Pharisee would probably have understood the word to mean another Pharisee.²³ Thus, these groups would not have understood that the word “neighbor” could mean everyone.

¹⁶ Mt. 5:43 NASB.

¹⁷ Mt.5:43 NLT.

¹⁸ Mt. 5:43 B.

¹⁹ Lev.19:18, NIV.

²⁰ George A. Bullrick, “Exposition of Matthew,” in The Interpreters Bible, ed. Noland B. Harmon (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 302.

²¹ Sherman E. Johnson, “Exegesis of Matthew,” in The Interpreter’s Bible, ed. Noland B. Harmon (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 302.

²² Johnson, “Matthew,” 303.

²³ Stagg, “Matthew,” 112

Another key word in these verses is “love.” According to one source, there were four Greek words for love. The word *storge* referred to family love; *eros* referred to the passionate nature of human love; and, *philia* referred to the feelings between close friends. The word used in these verses was “*agape* which means unconquerable benevolence and invincible goodwill. A person can only have *agape* love through Jesus Christ who enables us to conquer our natural tendency to anger and bitterness.”²⁴

The human tendency even today is to respond to hostility and hurt with revenge and bitterness. In addition, racism and prejudice exist today just as they did in Jesus’ day. From this standpoint, Jesus’ instruction to love everyone, both neighbors and enemies, is just as applicable for modern Christians as it was to the early church. The only way to show the *agape* form of love to others is through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

God’s Love Is For All, 5:45

NIV

“that you may be sons 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.”

The New American Standard Bible²⁵ also uses the phrase **sons of your Father**. According to one source, the Hebrew language did contain many adjectives. The phrase, “sons of” was often used with a noun to represent an adjective. Thus, “sons of your Father [God] would

²⁴ Barclay, “Matthew,” 172-173.

²⁵ Mt.5:45, NASB.

mean godlike men.”²⁶ Based on this viewpoint, Jesus was saying that those who loved both neighbor and enemies were exhibiting godlike love, the unconditional love that comes from God.

In the second part of this verse, Jesus emphasized that God’s love is for everyone. God offers his gift of salvation to everyone who will accept it. This gift is not based on human deeds or merit,²⁷ but it is available for all to choose or reject. Many of God’s gifts, like **the sun** and **the rain** are freely given to all regardless of the individual’s character or actions.²⁸ For the Christians of the early church, this meant that God loved both Jews and Gentiles equally, and that the two groups should relate to each other in the same way that God related to them.

The lesson taught in this verse helps the modern day reader to understand that God’s gifts are freely given, regardless of who or what people are. God’s gifts from nature are given freely without regard for who is evil or who is good. Even God’s most important gift, the promise of eternal life to those who believe is offered to all through God’s grace. Whether or not to accept this ultimate gift is a decision that each person must make.

A Higher Standard, 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 brothers, what are you doing more than other? Do not even pagans do that?”

²⁶ Barclay, “Matthew,” 173.

²⁷ Stagg, “Matthew,” 112.

²⁸ Stagg, “Matthew,” 112.

The New American Standard Bible²⁹ also states **tax collectors**. The New Living Bible³⁰ adds the adjective **corrupt** and the Barclay³¹ translation adds the word **renegade** to describe **tax collectors**. Since the New Living Translation and Barclay are both paraphrases, these adjectives were probably not included in the original Greek. However, they do emphasize the dislike that both Jews and Gentiles had for tax collectors. In the New American Standard Bible³² the word Gentiles is used rather than pagans. In the New Living Bible³³ the word heathen is used. To the Jewish people of Jesus, all three of these terms essentially meant the same thing. Because the Jewish people thought of themselves as more important to God, anyone who was non-Hebrews were thought of as “strangers,” “aliens,” “Gentiles,” and even “barbarian.”³⁴

These verses further emphasized the difference between human love and godlike or agape love. The Gentiles and tax collectors were “two despised classes among the Jews.”³⁵ However, even these two groups showed that “love within one’s group or fellowship is merely a natural and universal human trait.”³⁶ Just as natural and easy is the ability of brothers or friends to greet each other in love. What these questions in verses 46 and 47 emphasized to both Jews

²⁹Mt. 5:46, NASB.

³⁰Mt. 5: 46, NLT.

³¹Mt. 5:46, B.

³²Mt. 5:47, NASB.

³³Mt. 5: 47, NLT.

³⁴ Harper’s Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Gentiles” and “barbarians.”

³⁵McKenzie, “Matthew,” 73.

³⁶McKenzie, “Matthew,” 73.

and Gentiles alike was that God's love and the ability to love as God loves involved a higher standard or level greater than these examples of human love. One of the charges made against Jesus was that he ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus demonstrated the universal nature of God's love by making Matthew, a tax collector, one of his apostles.³⁷ This higher standard of love for others that Jesus expected of the early Christians remains the standard for Christians today.

God Demands Perfection, 5:48

NIV

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

This command given by Jesus summed up in one sentence the difference between the Mosaic Law as it was understood in that day and the real meaning of God's law. Perfection was not to be defined by the Pharisees or any other religious leaders.³⁸ God defined perfection. Jesus' instruction to the early Christians to **be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect** is as applicable today as it was in Jesus' day. One key to understanding this verse lies in the meaning of the word **perfect**.

According to one view, the Greek word used by the writer means, “that which is at the end.”³⁹ From this definition, the verse may refer to a future state of perfection, such as the reward of eternal life.⁴⁰ Another view suggests that the imperative verb form, Be perfect, places the

³⁷The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. “The Gospel According to Matthew.”

³⁸ Stagg, “Matthew,” 112.

³⁹ Bullrick, “Matthew,” 304.

⁴⁰ Bullrick, “Matthew,” 304.

demand in the present rather than in the future. In this view, Jesus “held up God’s perfection as the ideal or demand now.”⁴¹ The Greek word for perfect is *teleios*. Thus, something is perfect, or *teleios*, if it “realizes the purpose for which it was planned, designed, and made.”⁴² Based on these definitions, the demand stated by Jesus may mean both present and future perfection. However, the question remains: how does one become perfect like God is perfect? The answer to this question may be found in 1 John 4: 12, 16-18.^{43 44} These verses not only define love, they also tell how man can live in this world and be like God.

1 Jn. 4:12, 16-18 NIV

“No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”

“And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

While man will never gain the ultimate perfection that is God’s alone, it is possible to strive for perfection by living in godlike love. In this way, God who is love lives in us and his love is made complete, or perfect, within us. Living this way in the world brings assurance on the day of judgment of eternal life.

⁴¹Stagg, “Matthew,” 112.

⁴²Barclay, “Matthew,” 174.

⁴³ Note: A search for the words “love” and “perfect” in A Concordance to the New International Version: The NIV Mini-Concordance. Eds. John R. Kohlengerger, III and Edward W. Goodrick. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Corporation, 1984), led to the verses in 1 John.

⁴⁴1 Jn. 4:12, 16-18, NIV.

CONCLUSION

In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus taught that God's law or command was to love everyone, both neighbor and enemy. The teaching that God's love was for all was in opposition to the command to "love your neighbor" as it was interpreted by the Jews and especially the Pharisees. The idea that God could love both Jew and Gentile equally was not readily accepted by the Jewish people. Jesus taught that to love as God loves is a higher standard than any form of human love. The natural tendency of people is to love those who are easy to love. In addition, Jesus not only told his listeners how God expected them to love others, he also stated that they were to be perfect as God the Father is perfect. Becoming perfect involves loving others as God loves all people. When this command is obeyed, God who is love, dwells in the heart of the believer, and his love is made perfect within the believer.

God's demand to "be perfect" summarizes the entire meaning of Matthew 5:43-48, the sixth antitheses contained in the Sermon on the Mount. When viewed in their entirety, the final verse in this passage may be viewed as summarizing the entire section containing all six of the new laws of God.⁴⁵ While only God is perfect in everything, through the love of God, we have the ability to relate to others with godlike love. If we achieve this level of love while on earth, obeying God's law contained in the other five antitheses will be achieved. On a personal note,

⁴⁵Note from Dr. Lorin Cranford on Commentary Analysis part of paper. See also Dr. Cranford's online handout on the Sermon on the Mount, at: www.gardner-webb.edu/intra/cranford/SerMt-ot.htm

the study required by this assignment, helped me to understand Mt. 5:48, a verse that I had never really understood before.

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