

FIVE FORKS BRETHERN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5:43-48

DATE: 2019-03-24

Place: Auditorium

SUBJECT: Sermon on the Mount

Series: Whoever Hears these Words

THEME: Loving our Enemies

SERMON: "Can We Be Friends?"

Introduction

On May 16, 1569, **Dirk Willems**, an Anabaptist Believer, in Holland, was burned to death at the stake for being re-baptized as an adult, and refusing to accept his infant baptism as sufficient for obedience to Christ. He was also charged with allowing other believers, with similar convictions, to meet regularly in his home for services.

He became one of probably more than 1500 people put to death because **their** understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus, was contrary to what the Church at the time believed. But unlike many of those martyrs, who had their tongues clamped, so they could not witness to their executioners and perhaps convert them on the way to their deaths, Dirk's tongue was not clamped, and his cries, as the fire agonizingly slowly burned him to death, could be heard in the next town.

Dirk's story has become famous because of some events that led up to his death. He had been arrested and imprisoned and was awaiting trial and believed that he would probably be sentenced to death. So he made a rope out of some rags and escaped by sliding down the prison wall, and running away across a recently frozen pond. They say he was so thin from the meagre rations while in prison, that he did not break through the ice.

One prison guard saw him escaping and ran after him across that same frozen pond. He however was not as slight, and broke through the ice, started sinking and cried out for his life. Dirk, on hearing the guard's cries, stopped running away and instead turned back and rescued the guard. (pic). The guard, persuaded by his senior officer, proceeded to re- arrest Dirk Willems, and Dirk was subsequently burned at the stake.

Why would someone turn back and help his pursuer, knowing that it could lead to his death? Why would someone do that?

I believe it was because when Dirk **heard the words** (series graphic) of Jesus that we are wrestling with today, he chose to put them into practice. Even though it cost him his life. He loved his enemy.

The apostle Peter swore that he loved Jesus enough that he would give his own life. But no, in a few hours he backpedaled and denied that he even knew Jesus. He later repented, received Jesus forgiveness, and he **too** was then **martyred for following Jesus**.

This is how radical the words of Jesus are for us today. Radical enough that some of us may become angry with what we hear. (I recall how Jonah became angry when God asked him to love his enemies) Jesus' words are radical enough that some may choose to deny them or choose to interpret them in some other, less threatening or more safe and practical way.

How you choose to hear these words is up to you. I share them humbly, hopefully graciously, but also with a deep conviction that Jesus intends for us to put them into practice, even if it means at the cost of our lives. Just as it cost Jesus his life when he put them into practice going to the cross for you and me.

What did Jesus say?

Matthew 5:43 to 48 “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. ⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. ⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. ⁴⁷ If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. ⁴⁸ But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

There are some keywords to understand in this passage

Neighbor, enemy, hate, love, and be perfect. My prayer is that we will be able to understand these words so that we can figure out how we are to put them into practice.

When Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” he replied with [Matthew 22:37 and 39](#) “**You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.**”³⁸ **This is the first and greatest commandment.**³⁹ **A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’**

More simply he says: **love God and love others.** Jesus essentially gave this command to his disciples as a guide from God for their lives.

Anytime we are challenged with what to do in a particular situation, how to respond, how to act, what to say and so on we should ask the question:

Will my response show that I love God and that I love others? That I love my neighbor in the same way I love myself?

We may have the same question Jesus was asked, “**Who is my neighbor?**”

We are probably familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan. In that story a Samaritan, who was considered an enemy of the Jews, was shown to be the neighbor – or acted neighborly as a Jew would understand neighborliness.

This was a surprise to the Jews who were listening to Jesus that day. Just as Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 are a big surprise.

See, as you read the story of Israel through the Old Testament, we learn that their view of Gentiles seems to vary. **Sometimes** in the Old Testament, Gentiles were to be seen as the ‘others.’ ‘Those’ people who are to be avoided and excluded.

Have you ever been some place and encountered a group of maybe rowdy, strangely dressed people, who looked like they were up to no good? When we see that we often think and maybe even say to each other, “look at ‘those people’.” ‘I don’t trust ‘them.’ I hope

someone is keeping an eye on 'them.' And then we gather our children a little closer to us, just in case.

To a Jew, anyone who wasn't a Jew was one of "them" or the "other" people. And the Jews were to keep their distance or exclude themselves from those "others."

Sometimes the Jews were advised to at least be **civil towards** "them." In their minds "those others" would at some time, perhaps be included in God's all-encompassing kingdom, but not now not yet. Not till they got cleaned up and became like a Jew.

Still at other times, the distancing from the "others" for the Jews, become so **fierce** that the others were considered "**enemies.**" This would have been the case for the **Samaritan** Jesus talked about. It also would've been the case for the **Romans** in Jesus day.

Back in the 1940's some scrolls were found in a cave near the Dead Sea, in Israel. They were likely written around the time of Jesus. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls talks about the **Kitt'im**. That was a code word for the Romans. In the scroll it describes a day when the Kitt'im will be annihilated because they are the Sons of Darkness. They are the ultimate enemies of the Jews. The Romans would be overthrown by the hand God because they were evil.

My grandfather used to tell of earlier years when the old Forge Road out near where I live was considered the boundary between Bear Town and the village of Roadside, where I live. The bad kids were from Bear Town. The good kids lived in roadside. He would tell stories of how if someone from Bear Town crossed the Old Forge Road they were fair game to have stones thrown at them or beat up and sent back, just because they were not from here in Roadside. They were the others, the enemies. And if someone from Roadside crossed to the Bear Town side of the road they became fair game. In other words the people of Bear Town and the people of Roadside considered each other 'enemies.' Not to the death, but they really didn't like each other. Those feelings were not unique to Roadside and Bear Town. We may even have those types of feelings today.

You see the Jews knew they were God's elect and the Gentiles were "others" – the enemy. Gentiles were often referred to as sinners, pagans, wicked. Sometimes as neighbors

to be tolerated but often they were seen as enemies.

So as Jesus sits on that hillside and teaches he wants to explain what he means by loving God and loving others.

Jesus statement, “love your neighbor”, is found in the Old Testament. He was very likely referring to **Leviticus 19:18**. But it is not clear where Jesus got “hate your enemy” from.

Perhaps it is a reference to [Psalm 139:21 – 22](#)

O Lord, shouldn't I hate those who hate you?

Shouldn't I despise those who oppose you?

22 Yes, I hate them with total hatred,

for your enemies are my enemies.

And there are other Jewish writings that lean that way as well.

But by Jesus' day, “**loving those we like and hating those we don't like**” was, as one person put it, “**as common as skin.**” Everybody acted that way. So when the scribe asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” he was expecting to hear “Someone like yourself - another sympathetic, devout Jew. Someone who thinks like you. Who has the same values and so on.”

A **neighbor** in the Jewish mind at the time would've been a **Jewish** neighbor not one of those “others.”

An **enemy** on the other hand would've been a Samaritan, or more likely, a Roman, someone who dishes out persecution. The people on the mountainside that day may have begun asking themselves, “Who is my neighbor,” and “who is my enemy.” But thinking that they already knew the answer. And they would've been comfortable with “**love my neighbor** but **hate my enemy.**” But Jesus is going to take this view and turn it on its head. Jesus said:

“Love your enemy.”

And everyone would have gasped said, “You can't be serious.”

And when Jesus says, “love your enemy,” he goes on to add, “and **pray** for those who persecute you.” He is essentially saying the same again or commenting on the first statement.

So loving your enemy is at least praying for your enemy.

But to understand this passage we must understand the meaning of love.

Love as defined by how God loves.

One person has summarized it this way. **From God's behavior we learn that love is a 'rugged commitment to be with someone as someone who is for that person's good and to love them unto God's formative purpose. (McKnight)** What does he mean?

When we look at God's relationship and commitment to Israel throughout their history it reveals that God is one who enters into a relationship by being **present** with the people of Israel. Time and again we see that God is **on Israel's side**. God is **for** Israel's good. And we also see that God's **purpose** is to help them become the people he wants them to be. In the desert, He travels with them, feeds them, protects them, and teaches them. That is how God loves.

So when Jesus says, "love someone" he is talking about being with them, being for them, and helping them become who God wants them to be.

Now Jesus words are far more **radical**. Jesus is commanding his followers to commit themselves to be with their **enemies**. That means getting **close** to them. That means being **attentive to their needs**. And that means being a person who **longs for** and **works for** the good of someone they consider their enemy. One doesn't try to exclude or get rid of enemies, quite the opposite for Jesus.

So love cannot be **reduced** merely to tolerating the other person but rather working for the good of the other person. It means investing time and energy into helping them become the person that God wants them to be. You are to do this with someone who doesn't like you.

Now, if loving your enemy and praying for your enemy, are talking about the same thing, then praying for those who persecute us is not a **cute formula** that helps us get over the hump of bad feelings or resentment. But it is the **actual behavior that flows from a heart that goes to God** hoping for reconciliation. It desires and works to create a loving relationship with that person, whom you consider to be your enemy, and then becoming their friend.

You don't pray "Lord, get rid of them and keep me safe." Rather pray, "Father forgive them, and show me how to be their friend."

The early church got this. **Jesus** himself forgives his enemy persecutors at the cross. **Stephen**, as he is being stoned to death does the same thing. The apostle **Paul** says pray for a blessing on them. Peter says the same thing in his letter. Polycarp, an early church father writes to the Philippians:

Pray for all the saints. Pray also for kings and powers and rulers, and for those who persecute and hate you, and are the enemies of the cross in order that your fruit may be evident among all people, that you may be perfect in him.

May I add the name of **Dirk Willems** as one who understood Jesus words in the same way? Dirk acted for his pursuer. Dirk came close to his pursuer. Dirk intended to help his pursuer become the person God intended that person to be – a follower of Jesus.

Jesus continues – when we act that way towards a person – including our "enemies", we are actually living in a way that reflects who God is. John writes:

(1 John 4:7-12) Love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸ But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. God's love is brought to full expression in us.

And the reward for loving, even our enemies, is that we will be considered "children of God." Jesus came to usher in his kingdom of peace. **Loving and praying for our enemies is the first step towards this.** Because this is what God does.

Jesus says it this way: **For He (God) gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.**

Jesus follows that with **a penetrating question:**

If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt

tax collectors do that much. ⁴⁷ If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that.

God's love – seen in the sun and the rain – is showered on all humans, both the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous, the believers and the unbelievers.

If we only love **conditionally**, that is, if we only love certain types of people, people like us or whom we are comfortable with, we are only really loving ourselves. We are no better than the lying, cheating, traitors who were tax collectors. We are no better than the people whom we consider ungodly and wicked.

We know from the Gospels that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. He was a friend to the Gentiles – all of this was considered scandalous behavior by those who considered themselves God fearing, righteous people.

Jesus is saying, **it is unacceptable to claim that we believe and follow Him when all too often we hate some humans. To love humans in Jesus kingdom is to love all humans, not just a select few.**

So in verse 48, where Jesus calls his followers to be **perfect** as God is perfect, he is calling his followers to love the way God does. In this context we see **God's love is for all people**. So Jesus' followers are to love perfectly or completely and they do it by loving, not only their fellow Jewish neighbors, but also their enemy neighbors.

McKnight paraphrases Jesus this way:

Be perfect, that is love both your fellow Jewish neighbors and the Roman enemies in your midst – as your Father makes the sun rise and the rain fall on all humans – Jews and Romans – so you are to be perfect in love as your Father is perfect in love.

Perfection is to be the person who treats everyone as a neighbor. This is God's will for us.

Where do we begin? How do we put these words of Jesus into practice?

“It begins when we confess who is our enemy and it ends when we learn to love them as our neighbor.” (Mcknight)

So I ask you, “Who is your enemy?”

The Jews of Jesus day loved their neighbors in such a way that it expressed non-love or hate for the Romans. What do you mean? They **tolerated** the Romans because they had to. But they kept them at a **distance**, they did **not include** them in their circles. They looked down on the Romans as being **beneath** them, unclean and usually **wrong**. They did all they could to **oppose** them rather than be ‘for’ them – seeking their good, and helping them. They **talked** about the Romans with disparaging language and considered them people to be avoided and hopefully removed, gotten rid of. After all, they were enemies.

We do the same thing today. Many of us love our neighbors (the people like us or that we like) in such a way that we “hate” our enemies – (those not like us or that we don’t like.) We exclude them. We are quick to denounce or criticize them. If we hear something negative we easily repeat it so we can justify distancing ourselves from them – and so that others will dislike them as well.

If you spend any time at all on **social media**, this becomes apparent very quickly. We hear or see something negative about someone we don’t like or trust, we post it. Or we share it so more people will dislike or distrust the person. Then if you click on the comments section it gets even worse. And I am most disturbed when I see people, who claim to be followers of Jesus taking the lead in “hating” their enemies.

I believe Jesus is saying to all the people of Five Forks church – **You have heard it said, “Love your neighbors and hate your enemies. You think it is acceptable. But I say to you, Love your enemies.”**

Are we willing to ask ourselves honestly, the question, “Who is my enemy?”

We’ve all got enemies. Social media reveals very quickly whom people consider their enemies. Perhaps it is because of the sense of distance, safety and anonymity that social

media provides, that people quickly post derogatory or condescending comments about or attack one another – revealing the animosity that resides in their hearts.

But some of my enemies may be very close. I may see them every day or often. We may live in the same house. Work for the same company. Attend the same church. Even be on the same committee.

My enemies often become the people I start out simply disagreeing with. The ones who don't see the world the way I see it. They are the people who hold different convictions than I do about a whole host of things, interpretations of scriptures, applications of biblical truths. People who hold differing political views, support different political parties. People who disagree about rights and privileges. The role and responsibility of government. Gender issues. People of different ethnic origins, and races. People of different religions – some hostile to Christianity.

How can I check if I just disagree with someone, or if I have begun to consider them an enemy? Pay attention to your emotions when you see them, or hear them mentioned, or think about them. Or if you read about them or read something they've posted. If your heart is warmed and soothed, and you are drawn towards them, they are your neighbor. If your heart is cooled, fearful, distanced, hardened, angered, they are probably your enemy. This requires a very honest and deep penetrating look into our own hearts – with the help of the Holy Spirit, and other Spirit filled friends.

These acknowledged enemies are the ones Jesus calls you to respond to in a radical new way – to love them. We are a product of our upbringing, the times we live in. The dangers in our world. This is not an easing Jesus is asking us to do. I want to acknowledge that.

The question we must ask now is **how are you turning your enemies into your neighbors?** Jesus' main strategy for loving enemies seemed to be, **invite them to his table.** So at the table of Jesus we find typical enemies like tax collectors and sinners, prostitutes and outsiders. In other words Jesus **reached out** to those perceived to be Jewish enemies rather than avoiding them.

One college professor shared how a student had come into his office one day and said “I read your blog about homosexuality.” And then stopped. The professor said he tried to ease into the conversation by saying, “What did you think?” The student’s response was, “I’m homosexual. It’s a struggle for me.” But then he said, “Can we be friends?” The professor said “of course.”

The student proceeded to tell how he had “discovered” he was gay. How he did everything he could, prayer, counseling, and more, to try and get rid of the desires but nothing was working. He admitted to a few casual relationships that he said went too far. And then said again, “But we can be friends, right?” The professor replied, “Yes, we can be friends. You are my neighbor.” For nearly four years the professor and the student met – to talk about life, classes, careers, ambitions, family. The things friends talk about. The student seldom brought up his “struggle.” The professor shared how when the student graduated, “He came up to me in his gown, hugged me and said ‘Thanks. You’ve been my friend.’”

This is what Jesus is asking his followers to do. To become friends with those, we might consider enemies – and love them.

Enemy love is not a magical formula. It’s not a trick. It’s **a posture towards every human being we meet**. We are challenged in this passage to discern who it is, whom we treat as enemies. Those we claim to love but don’t. Those who never sit at table with us. Those we label and those we criticize. We work to have enemies become neighbors by extending love to them. Love is to treat others as we treat ourselves, and it is the rugged commitment to be *with* someone as someone who is *for* them in order to foster Christ likeness in them. (McKnight)

We don’t do this by saying we will do it or saying we believe it, but by extending in actions the love of God for all to others.

One man mowed his enemy’s lawn for him while he was on vacation.

One woman invited her enemy to have a cup tea with her.

Another woman put her phone away and began friendly conversations with her enemy.

We need to ask who our enemies are and get busy treating them as neighbors. We will discover that God is already there.

Pray

May God, who while we were still his enemies, died for us so we could become His friends, give us the desire and power to love our enemies in the same way this week.