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I think it is safe to assume that the few paragraphs from the Sermon on the Mount that Pastor Adams read a few minutes ago sounded pretty familiar to many of you. Unlike a couple of weeks ago when Jesus taught us to redefine success, love is not an un-thought about Christian ideal.

We know we are supposed to love. We know Jesus says to love everyone, even our enemies.

The rest of the world knows that too. People who don’t know much of anything about the Bible know the story of the Good Samaritan. The phrase “**turn the other cheek**” is a well-known Christian virtue beyond these walls.

We know we are supposed to be known for our love, but here’s the question for us to grapple with today... are we?

Your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors, your family, when they think of you, is the first word that comes to mind *love*?

Are Christians in America, in general, known for the kind of enemy-loving action that Jesus talks about here?...

Sometimes, right?

I think one of those unfortunately common shootings and subsequent trials that has been playing out in the news over the last few months, when Dylann Roof joined a bible class at a predominantly black church and shot and killed nine of those who had welcomed him to study God’s word with them. In the aftermath and the subsequent hearings this love for anyone (even enemies) that Christians are supposed to be known for was clearly on display.

In his first public hearing, just two days after the shooting, five family members offered Dylann (still an unrepentant enemy) love and forgiveness for the whole world to see.

So, are Christians known for the kind of love Jesus talks about here?

Sometimes... but...

Do you ever get the impression that as a Christian you are known more for the things you don’t love than what you do love?

This last week, in our Sunday morning Bible Class we started talking about another hot button issue, the roles of men and women. I half-jokingly pointed out that from a lot of people’s perspective, I don’t have the right credentials to talk about the roles of men and women because I am a white, middle-class, Christian, male. In a lot of people’s opinion, that disqualifies me from talking about that subject.

It is only a half-joke because it makes me wonder – is there a reason people don’t care what white, middle-class, Christian, males think about the roles of men and women? Is it possible that for so long and so loudly people who looked like me (white, middle-class, Christian, males) have been more clear on what they thought women shouldn’t do than the love they were to feel for them? In other words, I can’t really blame people for not wanting to listen to

me when I talk about the roles of men and women when for centuries people who looked like me taught and preached on this subject with anything but love.

Unlike what Jesus wanted his followers to be known for, Christian men were known for what they don’t love, rather than what they do love.

Unfortunately, my experience as a white, middle-class, Christian, male is pretty common... Christians haven’t been doing a very good job at having the defining characteristic of love... The recent book *Unchristian* published a heart-breaking survey of thousands of 16-29 year-old non-Christians. They were asked what phrase best described present day Christianity. Maybe you can guess the results... “Loving one another” wasn’t at the top of that list. 75% said, “too involved in politics,” 85% said, “hypocritical,” 87% “judgmental,” and the number one answer, 91% agreed “anti-homosexual.” The conclusion the author draws is that “we [Christians] have become famous for what we oppose, rather than who we are for.”

This friends, is not how Jesus wanted his followers to be known.

Now, I fully recognize a key part of loving anyone is making sure they know that they are sinners in desperate need of forgiveness from God.

I also recognize that the sinful nature is powerful thing, and there are some people whose hearts care so little about what God’s word has to say that they will never hear the love in our voices as we talk about some very touchy Biblical subjects, but I also know that at least part, if not a big part of the reason Christians aren’t known for their love is because they have been anything but loving as they shared the truths of God’s word and interacted with the world around them.

Simply put, Christians are not reflecting the identity Christ wants us to have.

And if we are going to get anything from Jesus’ sermon today we need to take a good hard look at the Christian staring back at us from the mirror and see if we are contributing anything to this identity crisis that we modern Christians have.

We are supposed to love absolutely everyone – even our enemies.

Maybe it is worthwhile to define just who your enemy is. I don’t know about you, but I don’t tend to label the people in my life as “enemies.” So who is Jesus talking about here?

Simply put, your enemy is anyone who makes it hard for you to love them – hard because even though you try to love them, they never love you back.

Your enemy is your coworker who thinks and operates differently than you do making interactions with him sometimes awkward and other times frustrating. Even though you offer olive branch after olive branch, they throw it right back in your face.

Your enemy is your great Aunt Judy who never includes a word of praise along with her harsh criticisms.

Your enemy are those people in the world who look at what you believe about the roles of men and women and about human sexuality and label you bigoted, homophobic, misogynistic, no better than a knuckle-dragging Neanderthal.

Jesus' point today: I don't care if people are hard to love. I don't care if they never love you back. I want my followers to be known for love. I want you to love them.

And that's a hard thing to do, isn't it? I mean, I think we can all make the effort and get on board with Jesus' first paragraph today. We raise our kids to turn the other cheek. We can bite our tongue and hold back a sharp sarcastic jab (sometimes, although we may not be as good at that as we'd like to think). We can muster indifference to our enemies, but love?

Jesus makes perfectly clear that what expects from us isn't indifference or successfully holding back our tempers. Jesus expects us to love our enemies.

Loving someone who doesn't love you back flies in the face of everything we intuitively know about relating to other humans... it just isn't natural. I'm supposed to love someone who hates me – to feel for the taxing coworker, my Aunt Judy, that name-calling atheist the same thing I feel for my wife and my kids? That just doesn't make sense! It seems impossible.

It's just not how humans have ever operated. Jesus had to say to his followers 2000 years ago, "Look, you've heard it was said, 'Get even with people, and love your neighbor, but not your enemy' but that's not how I want my followers to operate.

**You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth."** For centuries it had been a commonly assumed, Moses given fact that if someone hurt you, you had every right to hurt them back.

Jesus says, "You've heard that this is the way the world operates, but that is not how I want you to operate."

Jesus continues, "**You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbors and hate your enemies."**

Jesus says, "You've heard that you are supposed to love the people who are like you, who agree with you politically or religiously, or look like you, or sound like you. You've heard that those who don't agree with you, can be written off – that's how the rest of this world works. But that is now how I want you to operate."

Jesus wants those people who hate us and reject us to still know at the end of the day that we love them by our words, our actions, and in our hearts – because he wanted love to be the defining characteristic of his followers.

And it is an unfortunate and undeniable truth, the world does not see the Christian church showing this kind of love. The world doesn't see *me* showing this kind of love.

His expectations in this love couldn't be any clearer. He ends this "love your enemies section" with a knife straight to my heart – "**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**"

But that knife... that is exactly why Jesus is preaching this sermon right now.

Jesus doesn't just want us to come away from this understanding that we have to love better than we are right now. That is a *part* of what he wants us to understand, but not the only thing, not even the most important thing.

Jesus wants us to feel that knife, to realize just how impossible this task is – to love people who make my life harder, not just be indifferent to them, not just to turn the other cheek, not just to hold my sharp tongue, but to actually love them, perfectly and all the time. Not one single person has or can come even close to the kind of love Jesus tells us he expects from us here in Matthew – not one, except our God.

When it comes to love for enemies, there is a reason Jesus uses the Father as a litmus test. Jesus holds up the love of the Father and says, "Compare your love to this, anything less than this is not enough."

Our, quite frankly, inexcusable and ugly failures to love make us pretty hard to love.

And yet, how incredible a love our Father has lavished on us, that in spite of our unlovable-ness we should be called children of God. And that is what we are.

Jesus came and preached his sermon on this mountain to make perfectly clear to his first listeners and to us that what he was about to do was necessary.

Jesus didn't walk to his cross as one possible way to have a good relationship with our Creator, he walked to his cross because it was the only way for us to have a good relationship with our Creator.

Jesus came to sinful, hard to love people like us... before we were better... before we repented right, believed right, or acted right... before our love was corrected. God our Father demonstrated his love for us like this: while we were still sinners God sent his Son born of a woman to die for us.

Christianity may have an identity crisis because of the actions of Christians, but Christ has no such issue. He loves us perfectly, all the time – even when we are hard to love.

That is why Jesus was on that mountainside teaching his disciples. He came to teach us how to love, but he also came to love for us.

Today is the last day we will look at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I'd encourage you to find some time to read the rest of it this week (Matthew 5-7). And while I love preaching on Jesus' sermon, I'm happy to follow him down this mountain because it is what he did after this sermon that my heart loves to study. In a week and a half we will follow Jesus through the church season of Lent, as he walks to his cross to show us what love looks like.

The only way we can begin to have love like Jesus is to spend more time enjoying his love for us.

Amen.

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