Turn in your Bibles with me to Matthew, chapter 5. I originally intended to finish chapter 5 last week, because I thought I could cover verses 38-48 in one week. I don’t know what in the world I was thinking. These verses are so rich and so full that we could spend a whole series right here. But you can relax. We won’t. But we do have to spend one more week here, because these verses are the epitome of Jesus’ teaching. They capture just how radical and life-altering Jesus’ teaching really is. No one has ever taught like Jesus Christ. No one has ever said the things Jesus said. And no one has ever had the power to change people’s lives and transform their hearts and empower them to live out His teaching like Jesus. There is no one like Jesus, and today we’re going to focus on His teaching in verses 43-48. So read with me, Matthew 5:43-48. Jesus says, *“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 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. 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 others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

These verses are the last piece in a section of Jesus’ teaching that started seven weeks ago in verse 17. And it’s no accident that Jesus’ ends this section by teaching about love. Love is at the center of everything Jesus ever teaches and everything Jesus ever does. In fact, love is the very essence of Christianity. 1 John 4 tells us, *“God is love.”* The God who created all things and gives meaning to all that exists is a loving God. That means love is at the heart of all reality, because God’s very nature is one of love. Because of this, Jesus tells us in Matthew 22 that the two greatest commands in the world are to love God and love people. He says, “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself. If you do those two things, you’ll fulfill everything Scripture teaches, because the whole Bible hangs on those two commands. Love God. Love people.” Paul says the same thing in Romans 13:8-10 when he writes, *“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”* Love is at the heart of everything God calls us to do. In fact, Jesus tells us that love is *the* thing that will set us apart as His followers. In John 13:35, He says, *“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”* If you are a follower of Jesus, you will love people. If you don’t love people, you aren’t a follower of Jesus. Period. 1 John 4:7-8 says the same thing in a different way. It says, “If you love, you know God. And if you don’t love, you don’t know God.”

The point is, I cannot overemphasize just how important love is. If you’re going to live in a way that really matters, if you’re going to know God, if you’re going to follow Jesus, then Jesus’ teaching about love has to take root in your heart and make you a loving person. So let’s look at what Jesus teaches us about love today. There are five truths that I want us to see.

 The first truth is that love does not depend on who the other person is. It depends on who you are. Look at verses 43-44. Jesus says, *“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.”* If you remember from last week, the Jews of Jesus’ day had taken the command to love their neighbor and had twisted it to mean that they didn’t have to love anyone who wasn’t their neighbor. They could hate everyone who wasn’t a Jew. In other words, their love depended entirely on who the other person was.

And Jesus says, “That’s not love. When the love of God truly gets a hold of you and changes your heart, you won’t just love your neighbors. You’ll love everyone. You’ll even love your enemies. In fact, you’ll even love the people who persecute you… the people who are cruel to you, the people who oppose you, the people who get on your nerves, the people who mock you, the people who don’t deserve it at all… because your love isn’t based on who they are or what they do. It’s based on who are. You love, not because the circumstances prompt you to, but simply because you are a loving person. You love because that’s who you are… because that’s who God is making you.”

Verses 46-47 say the same thing. Jesus says, *“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 others? Do not even pagans do that?”* If you love only the people who love you, that doesn’t make you a loving person. If you love only your brothers – only the people who are like you – that doesn’t make you a loving person. When you’re a loving person, you will just love… simply because you’re a loving person.

And, Church, I hope you see what this means for us. It means that we can’t be selective in who we love. It’s not enough just to love the people we like. It’s not enough just to love the people who are like us. It’s not enough just to love other Christians. If we do that, but then we fail to love all other people, we’re no different than the world, and we’re not yet like Jesus.

And I want us to think about some of the hardest examples of this. Loving those who persecute us means that we have to love Muslims, and we have to love liberal political activists, and we have to love abortion doctors. Now, we don’t have to love what they do, but we can’t use that as an excuse not to love them. And we struggle with this. We often tend toward hatred and condemnation a lot more than love in those situations. And that reveals that we haven’t truly becoming loving yet, because our love still depends on who they are and not who we are. And when you think in those terms, you see just how radical and life-altering Jesus’ teaching really is. We can’t hardly comprehend loving like that.

But then we also need to realize that Jesus has examples in mind that are a lot less extreme, as well. In verse 47, He mentions something as simple as greeting people. So Jesus is telling us that we should love the difficult people that we encounter in everyday life. Do you love that family member who really gets on your nerves? Do you love that person at church who always disagrees with you? Do you love people who worship differently than you or dress differently than you? Do you love the person at school that no one wants to talk to?

When the love of God truly starts to change your heart, you will love people, not because of who they are, but because that’s who you are.

The second truth Jesus teaches us is that love leads you to lay down your rights. This is a hard truth for us and it grows out of something we saw last week when we took verses 38-48 together as one section. If you remember from last week (and if you don’t, I’ll tell you right now), all of Jesus’ examples in verses 38-42 have a legal background to them. In verse 38, eye for eye and tooth for tooth meant you had the right to demand justice and receive fair payment when someone wronged you. In verse 39, if someone struck you on the right cheek with a backhand, you had the right to take them to court and receive a financial settlement. In verse 40, if someone wanted to take your clothing as collateral for a loan, they could only take your tunic. You had a right to keep your cloak. In verse 41, a Roman soldier could force you to carry his luggage, but only for one mile. And in verse 42, you had no legal obligation to give to beggars, and you weren’t legally required to loan money to people who weren’t going to repay interest.

And in every single instance, Jesus says, “Don’t demand your rights. Take less than what is rightfully yours and give more than you have to.” Don’t demand eye for eye repayment. Take less. Don’t sue for a backhand. Endure the insult and even be willing to receive another. If someone demands collateral from you, give more than is legally required. Serve Roman soldiers more than you have to. Carry their baggage twice as far as they can make you. Give to people who need it even when there is no legal obligation to do so. And loan to people even when it’s not legally required and not financially beneficial. In every case, Jesus is saying, “Don’t think of yourself first. Don’t demand your rights. Don’t just do what the law requires you to do. Do what love prompts you to do. Live by love and not the law.”

And this idea of laying down our rights is almost completely foreign to us. As Americans, we take pride in our rights. And we live in a culture that encourages us to demand our rights. In fact, we usually live with a sense of entitlement… that everyone else is obligated to give us not just what we deserve, but even what we want. And nothing could be farther from what Jesus teaches. Jesus teaches that when the love of God truly starts to change our hearts and make us love people, instead of demanding our rights, we will lay down our rights. Instead of asking, “What can I get?” we’ll ask, “What can I give?” Instead of using people to help us get what we want, we’ll give up what we want in order to help people.

And there are 100,000,000 practical applications of this. Let me give you three based on the examples Jesus gave. When Jesus talks about giving more than is required of you, He’s reminding us that love is generous. And a great indicator of how we’re doing in this area is the way we tip waiters and waitresses. Do you grudgingly calculate the lowest percentage possible, or do you tip with a generosity that grows out of a loving heart? Love won’t say, “This is all I *have* to give.” Love will say, “This is what I *want* to give to bless another person.”

A second example is when Jesus talks about turning the other cheek. Most likely, He was talking about someone backhanding you as an insult. And Jesus says that instead of escalating the situation, love will absorb that insult and break the cycle. And this reminds us that love is both very humble and very strong. When you’re loving, you don’t feel the need to defend yourself against insults, because you’re so humble that you’re not worried about yourself. And when you’re loving, you’re so strong that you’re able to endure those insults without lashing back.

So practically speaking, the next time someone says something hateful, will you be hateful back or will you respond in love? When your spouse is having a bad day and snaps at you, will snap back, or will you be understanding and defuse the situation? When your teenager smarts off, will you respond with a calloused, sarcastic discipline that mimics their behavior or with a gracious discipline that sets the example of love? When someone gossips about you, will you gossip about their tendency to gossip, or will you confront them privately and lovingly?

The last practical example I want us to think about is how we make decisions and handle disagreements as a church. When you think about what this church should be and what it should look like, what’s your primary motivation? Are your thoughts based on your opinions and your preferences and what you want from church? Or are your thoughts based on how we can best serve others and reach others and love others? If the grace of God is changing us and making us loving people, we won’t demand that we get our way. We won’t insist that our desires and our wants be satisfied. We will lay those things down. In fact, we will even lay down our *rights* for the sake of others. Our love will lead us to lay down our rights, because we are more interested in what we can do for others than what can be done for us. The greatest model of this that the world has ever seen is in the life and death of Jesus Himself. Jesus had every right to claim all the glory of heaven for Himself. Jesus had every right to destroy us for our rebellion against Him. And Jesus has every right to hate us for our sin that caused His crucifixion. And yet, what did Jesus do? He laid down His rights. He didn’t demand the glory that He deserved. He didn’t demand that we pay for our sins. Instead, He loved us enough to take our sin on Himself and to die our death in our place. Jesus gave up what He deserved so we could have what we don’t deserve. His love led Him to lay down His rights. And we are called to follow Jesus and do the same. Love leads you to lay down your rights.

The third truth I want us to see in Jesus’ teaching about love is that love fulfills the law. Look at verses 43-44 again. Jesus says, *“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.”* Now remember, “Love your neighbor” was a command given by God in the Old Testament. But, “Hate your enemy,” was a religious tradition that had been added to the law. And Jesus points out that if you keep the law by loving your neighbor and hating your enemy, you aren’t really fulfilling the law. You’re missing the purpose of the law. Instead, when you truly start to love all people, whether neighbors or enemies, *then* you fulfill the law. It’s the exact same thing that we heard Paul say in Romans 13. Love is the fulfillment of the law, because if you truly love people, you won’t murder, you won’t steal, you won’t lie, you won’t commit adultery. If you truly love people, there is a real sense in which you don’t even have to worry about any other laws, because love naturally fulfills them. Love fulfills the law.

And that leads directly into our fourth truth about love. Love exposes the inadequacies of legalism. This truth is really just an expansion of the fact that love fulfills the law. But I want us to spend a couple of minutes here, because this is connected to the heart of everything Jesus has been teaching in this entire section from verse 17 to verse 48. In verse 17, Jesus started by saying that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. In other words, Jesus came to complete the law and to show us God’s real intention for the law and to accomplish God’s real purpose with the law. And in verse 20 Jesus tells us what this means for us. He says, *“I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*  You see, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were masters at keeping the letter of the law and looking good on the outside while they rotted away on the inside. That’s why every time you turn around in the gospels Jesus is blasting them for being hypocrites… because who they were on the inside didn’t match what they did on the outside. And Jesus basically says, “Look, if your righteousness is only like the Pharisees’, then you have missed the real reason why God gave you the law. When God gave you the law, He wasn’t just concerned with your behavior. He was concerned with your heart. He doesn’t just want you to act a certain way. He wants you to be a certain type of person.” And that means it’s not enough just to do the right things on the outside. You also have to become the right type of person on the inside.

And then starting in verse 21 and running all the way through verse 48 today, Jesus gives us specific examples to show us exactly what He means. He says, “You’ve heard that it was said, ‘Do not murder.’ But I tell you that if you harbor anger in your heart, or if you don’t try to reconcile broken relationships, you have the same problems in your heart that a murderer does. You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that if you get divorced for just any old reason, or even if you just lust in your heart, you have the exact same problems in your heart that an adulterer does. You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not break your oaths.’ But I tell you that if you don’t keep your word even when you don’t take an oath, you have the same problems in your heart that a liar does.”

And so what we see over and over is that Jesus is not just dictating behavior to us. He’s describing what our heart should be like. And it is really, really important for you to hear that. Jesus is not just dictating behavior to you. He’s describing what your heart should be like. He’s not just telling you to follow the rules and that will be enough to get you into the kingdom of heaven. He’s telling you that you have to follow Him. You have to trust Him and be saved by Him and be changed by Him and be like Him. That’s the only way to get into the kingdom of heaven.

And as we come to the end of this section and we hear Jesus’ teaching on love, I hope it opens your eyes to why Jesus doesn’t just dictate behavior and tell us to follow the rules… It’s because that type of legalistic approach is inadequate. Legalism is powerless to accomplish God’s purposes. You see, God wants to change your *heart*. Legalism can only change your *behavior*.

And don’t get me wrong, legalism can be very effective at changing your behavior. Plenty of people in plenty of churches have been guilt-tripped and harassed and pressured into good behavior. Plenty of people in plenty of cults have been guilt-tripped and harassed and pressured into good behavior. And what’s even worse is that a lot of times, we pat ourselves on the back for that and act like we’ve done our job… even as their hearts rot away on the inside. And Jesus is screaming, “That’s not the point! If you just change their behavior, but you don’t change their hearts, that’s not good enough for the kingdom of heaven!”

Over and over Jesus has shown us why legalism is so inadequate. You can legalistically keep, “Do not murder,” by never killing another human, and the whole time your heart can be festering with an anger and rage and bitterness that would put Hitler to shame. You can legalistically keep, “Do not commit adultery,” by never having an extramarital affair, and the whole time your heart can be eaten up with the most insidious, perverted forms of lust imaginable. You can legalistically keep, “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” by never demanding excessive repayment, and the whole time your heart can be full of vengeance and bitterness and greed. You can legalistically keep, “Love your neighbor,” and the whole time your heart can be black with hatred, as long as you create a loophole as big as the Pacific Ocean by saying, “But my enemies aren’t my neighbors. I can still hate my enemies.”

You see, legalism is completely inadequate to change your heart. When you take a legalistic approach to the law, you end up being totally focused on the law. You want to know, “What do I have to do to keep this law?” And pretty soon that becomes, “What can I do to get around this law without breaking it? What loopholes can I find? How close can I get without crossing the line?” Because in legalism all that matters is that you keep the law. Technicalities become more important than transformed hearts.

And that totally misses the heart of Christianity. Remember what we saw last week: Christianity is about pursuing Jesus Christ. It’s not about, “How close can I get to the line?” It’s about, “How close can I get to Jesus?” It’s not about, “How can I keep the law?” It’s about, “How can I be like Jesus?”

You see, the heart of Jesus’ teaching is about your heart. And legalism is completely inadequate to change your heart. Only the love of Jesus can change your heart. So love exposes the inadequacies of legalism.

And, Church, that is why it is monumentally important for this to be a place of love and not legalism. Because only the love and grace of God will change people’s lives and produce spiritual results that truly last and truly matter. Legalism may look good on the outside, but it’s a façade. There’s no substance to it. Only the love and grace of God can penetrate so deeply that it actually changes who we are and makes us like Jesus. So I pray that we won’t settle for anything less. Even if it’s a little messier, even if it’s a little harder, even if it’s a little scarier for some of you to extend love rather than legalism, it’s worth it. Only the love and grace of God will change people’s lives and produce spiritual results that truly last and truly matter. Love exposes the inadequacies of legalism.

Finally, in a lot of ways, our fifth and last truth is the most important one, because it shows us how we can love like this. You can only love like this if you are becoming like God. Look at verses 44-45. Jesus says, *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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.”*

Now, this it is easy for us to misunderstand this statments, unless we remember what Jesus has already taught us in the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus says, *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven,”* the word “that” should remind us of two different aspects of Jesus’ teaching. First of all, Jesus is saying we have to be like this if we’re going to follow Him. He’s describing what His followers look like, and He says His followers love people the way God loves people. And that means if you don’t ever love people this way, then you aren’t a follower of Jesus. Period. Jesus is very serious about this.

But, at the very same time, it would be a mistake to think that means we have to love people this way *before* we can become a follower of Jesus. It would be a mistake to think that our love for people earns God’s love for us and earns our ticket into the kingdom of heaven. That is not what Jesus means here. And the reason we know that’s not what He means is because from the very first verse of this sermon He has told us that’s not what He means. Jesus started this whole sermon by telling us that when you are poor in spirit… when you recognize that you are spiritually bankrupt and have nothing to offer God, and you mourn over your sinfulness, and you are meek and humble and broken before God, and you hunger for God’s righteousness… THEN, God does a gracious work in your heart and He fills you with His righteousness. And everything else comes after that. It’s after that that Jesus makes all these demands on our lives. It’s after that that Jesus tells us we have to be like God and love like God. You see, God’s grace changes our hearts first, and He makes us like Jesus, and He welcomes us into the kingdom of heaven, and then we start living like our heavenly Father. I mean, all the way back in verse 16, Jesus already called God our Father, which means we are already His children. And now, 30 verses later, Jesus is saying, “So live like your Father. God has put His character, His righteousness, His spiritual DNA in you, so start living it out.”

We see the exact same thing again later on in this sermon. In Matthew 7:17-18 Jesus says, *“Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”* Jesus clearly says, *“A bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”* In other words, you can’t bear good fruit in order to become a good tree. You have to become a good tree in order to bear good fruit. So, for our text today, you don’t produce the fruit of love first *so that* you’ll be a good tree. No. God *makes* you a good tree first, and *then* you produce the fruit of love.

As John Piper says, “If you take the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, all the commandments assume that a profound conversion has happened – a new birth – before our righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. We do not earn or merit our entrance into heaven. We receive it as a free gift and gracious promise, and then we live in a way that shows where our treasure is and who our Father is. Loving our enemies is a *proof* that the power of the kingdom has entered your life, not a *payment* for the power of the kingdom to enter your life.”

So make sure you get this in the right order. We don’t *become* God’s children by loving like God. We love like God, because we *are* God’s children. We don’t *become* citizens of the kingdom by living like the king. We live like the king, because we *are* citizens of the kingdom. In other words, when we love people the way God loves people that doesn’t *earn* God’s love. That’s *evidence* that God’s love is already in us. As 1 John 4:19 says, *“We love because (God) first loved us.”*

And it is monumentally important for us to grasp that. If you think Jesus is just telling you to be a good person and follow the rules, if you think Jesus is just dictating behavior for you, you have totally missed the entire point of His teaching. That’s exactly what He’s telling you isn’t good enough. It’s not just your behavior that needs to change. Your filthy, rotten heart needs to change, and only the grace of God can do that.

So if you think this is just about following rules and dictating behavior, you are setting yourself up for failure of epic proportions. Your behavior will never be good enough. Your righteousness will never be enough for the kingdom of heaven. Only Jesus’ righteousness is enough. Your only hope is that Jesus will work in your heart and change you… that Jesus will give His righteousness to you. Jesus is telling you that your very heart has to be changed. You can only love like this if you are becoming like God, and only Jesus can do that for you. The only way to become the type of person Jesus describes in these verses is to follow Jesus and receive His grace.

And I pray that you have heard me say that over and over during the past few weeks. You must trust the grace of God to change your heart and make you like Jesus. That is the primary, foundational truth of Jesus’ sermon. That is the foundation of the gospel. It is the foundation of Christianity. Unless you get that, you don’t get Christianity. You must trust the grace of God to change your heart and make you like Jesus.

 Now, with that said, it would be a tragedy if you miss the way Jesus intends for that truth to affect you. Here’s what I mean: The only way to become the type of person Jesus describes in these verses is to follow Jesus and receive His grace... AND the effect that Jesus intends when you follow Him and receive His grace is that you really do become this type of person. In other words, if you really follow Jesus, you will look like God

and love like God. And if you don’t look like God and love like God, you aren’t following Jesus.

So as we get ready to close, I pray this truth will do two things for you. First, I pray that it will stir up in your heart a sense of your desperate need for God’s grace. I pray that it will cause you to throw yourself completely on Jesus as you put all of your trust and all of your hope in His righteousness and His ability to do for you what you can’t do for yourself. And second, I pray that this truth will motivate you to love more and more like your heavenly Father loves. And how does God love? *“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”* In other words, He shows us goodness and grace every single day, whether we deserve it or not. He loves us, not because of who we are, but because of who He is.

And God calls us to become the same type of loving people. So I pray you will love people, not because of who they are, but because God has made you a loving person. I pray that your love will lead you to lay down your rights. I pray that as you love, you will fulfill the law and you will expose the inadequacies of legalism. And, Church, I pray, how I pray, that you will become more and more like God as you love people the way God loves you.