***No 8 Seeing our enemies differently Matthew 5:43 to 48***

Jesus is giving his disciples teaching that will help them understand their place in his kingdom and in their world. This is the last of his ‘antithesis’ statements where Jesus contrasts what was being taught by the Jewish leaders with the true meaning as written in the pages of scripture. OT writing had become twisted by a legalistic interpretation of many laws which were originally written to give people freedom.

This is perhaps the most challenging of them all. Most of us would say we have people in our networks we find it hard to get on with – we may not call them ‘enemies’ but they’re not among our favourite people.

1. How do these tense relationships happen?

Why do we sometimes end up avoiding some people because we really don’t like them?

What could we have done to stop this tension developing?

‘Love your neighbour’ was one of the central truths of the OT. (e.g. Lev 19:18). When answering a legal expert’s question on the greatest commandment, Jesus replied with the command to love God and to love one’s neighbour as oneself. (Matthew 22:36 to 40). The statement ‘hate your enemies’ is not found in the OT. Moses directed the people to assist an enemy in need (Exodus 23:4 & 5)

Perhaps what causes the difficulties with this idea is another central OT truth – God’s hatred of evil. (Psalm 5:4, Deut 7:2 and 30:7). The Psalmist takes it a stage further

 ***‘The arrogant cannot stand in your presence, you hate all who do wrong’ (Psalm 4:5)***

 See also Psalm 139:21 & 22

1. Why is the idea of God hating evil so important?

If God did not hate evil what would be the consequences for us and the world?

Later groups in Israel took it too far. The Essenes who lived at Qumran (Dead sea scroll territory) were instructed to ‘..love all the sons of light … and hate all the sons of darkness’. Because God hates evil, those who embody evil are understood to be God’s enemies. But Jesus takes the competing attitudes of love for neighbour and hate for enemies and brings them together in a way that would have shocked his audience.

1. God does hate evil but his intent is to bring about reconciliation. We used to say ‘God loves the sinner but hates the sin’.

How do we do that when someone has done us great harm or damage?

Should we even try to be reconciled or just ignore the perpetrator?

It was radical because it went against what was happening in Israel in the 1st century. There were many factions in Jewish society who didn’t get on – then there was a genuine resentment towards the Roman occupiers. But this new teaching of Jesus shows that God loves all the people he created and wants them all to repent of their wickedness.

1. Jesus is saying we should look at all people in the world as he does. We need to love them enough to reach out to them with the message of the gospel.

We are encouraged to ‘pray for those who persecute us’ (v44) – does God really expect me to pray for people who have given me grief? Is this just too hard?

Jesus gives a reason – ‘that you become the sons of your Father in heaven’ (5:45). This does not mean we become a child of God because we love our enemies. Rather it is because we are children of God that we should act like Jesus.

1. We need to consider the radical effect of this idea.

How would it affect the world we live in and the relationships between nations? (be current in your examples)

How would it affect our nation?

How would it affect our church?

How would it affect you?

Jesus follows this up with two examples of common grace given to all people both evil and good. He is helping his disciples understand why his disciples are to love both neighbour and enemy. God’s sun rises on all people – rain falls on all people. All of God’s creatures are worthy of his provision of light and life-giving rain (rain in Israel is always seen as life giving) God doesn’t create pockets of sun and rain just for his followers. Everybody gets the blessing.

1. If each of us shares God’s love even with those who we have fallen out with, you might get a variety of responses.

How do you deal with the person who tells you to get lost?

How do you deal with the apathetic person?

How do you deal with person who receives you warmly?

Jesus finally draws on natural relationships. Everybody takes care of their own groups who love and care for each other? Even tax collectors do that (the most hated members of society because they collected money to be paid to the Romans or the temple authorities)

1. How easy is it for those attitudes to develop in our groups? – we speak to the people we like and leave the person we’re unfamiliar with on the outside.

How good are we at welcoming the stranger?

How does this affect our love for people of other beliefs and cultures? – Are we too selective?

**REFLECTION**

**On the face of it, Jesus’ last statement is impossible to do. ‘Be perfect’ (5:48)**

**This statement acts as a summary of all we have seen in the ‘antithesis’ statements of Matthew 5. We never will be perfect until heaven.**

**Matthew here is writing in the future tense – literally ‘you shall be perfect’**

**It is an encouragement to strive to follow all the teaching of Jesus until, one day, you will be with him in the perfection of Heaven.**

**Why not read right through this section (Matthew 5:13 to 48) and ask God to help you, by his Holy Spirit, to make a radical difference in your world?**