

Theme: “Tough” Love

Text: Matthew 5:38-48 (NIV)

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. 43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 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. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Did you have a nice Valentine’s Day this past Tuesday? Did you do anything special with your “special someone?” I’m guessing that at least some of you did. I would also be willing to bet that *none* of us here today went out and bought flowers for our mortal enemy, or got some chocolates for that person we know that just really has it in for us, or bought dinner for someone we just really can’t stand. Wasn’t on your Valentine’s Day agenda? Wasn’t on mine either!

Last Sunday we talked about what **Love is** as the Bible defines it, and about what love isn’t. We talked about how **Love is** always doing what is best for someone and not necessarily just making them feel good. We were reminded that love—true love—goes much deeper than cards and candy or flowers and favors. It’s a self-less attitude of the will and heart that is put to action in many different ways, but always seeks what is truly best for the other person.

With thoughts of Valentine’s Day floating in our heads it was probably fairly easy to think of **love** as we contemplated the sermon last week. The **love** that Jesus speaks about in our text for today is no where near as easy to think about or comprehend and it’s certainly much harder to put into practice. Jesus is speaking in our text about **“Tough” Love**. No, not the type of love you give to your children when you have to discipline them. But rather a love that takes *discipline* and is **“tough”** because it’s very hard to put into practice—in fact, it’s impossible without the Spirit of God working in our hearts. Nevertheless it is a **love** that our heavenly Father calls His children to have in their hearts and lives. It is a **love** that once again reflects His love for us and all mankind. We pray that the Spirit of God will bless our study and our lives as we seek to put this **“Tough” Love** into practice.

Our text is taken from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” (**Matthew 5-7**). Some have called this sermon an extended *What does this mean?* to the Lord’s second great commandment **“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 12:31)**. What you may have noticed first about our sermon text for this morning is just how many familiar sayings, that we hear even in secular society, are based on phrases from this text:

- ✠ “Turn the other cheek” (v. 39)
- ✠ “Give him the shirt off your back” (v. 40)
- ✠ “Go the extra mile” (v. 41) and possibly, based on that same verse, “Walk a mile in another man’s shoes.”

Did you notice, however, one particular verse from our text that is not a familiar saying in society? Take a look again at v. 44, **“But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** Can you think of why this command from Jesus has not “caught on” in the lingo of the world around us? Yes, some of the other phrases speak of humility, love, and sacrifice for another person, but **“love your**

enemies?!?!” “Pray for those who persecute you?!?!” Jesus can't be serious, can He? That's just not natural! That goes against the grain of everything we are as human beings!

Exactly! Yes, Jesus is serious when He tells us to love our enemies. And yes, it is unnatural to do this. Without the Holy Spirit, without the **love** of God living inside of us this is, in fact, impossible to put into practice.

As we mentioned even in our sermon from last Sunday **love**, true love, can be **“tough.”** It can be very difficult to do what is best for someone else; to put their needs ahead of your own. It can be very difficult to be self-less, to be self-sacrificing and forgiving toward others (and again, without the **love** of God Himself dwelling in us it is truly impossible!). But that's what God's **love** is! God's love for us (and all people) is **“tough!”** God's love is always willing to do what's best for us and others even when it's hard, even when it's undeserved, and undesirable to do so. Jesus reminds us in our text that God our Father **“causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (v. 45).** God showers His love, mercy, and countless blessings even on those who are **“unrighteous”** (unbelievers), those who do not even believe in His existence; His enemies!

Beyond that He showed His ultimate love for them by sending His Son Jesus to forgive and save them as well: **“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19 NIV).** **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).** Notice those passages said **“the world”**—**“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,” “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.”** That means everybody! Believers as well as unbelievers. “Good,” well-behaved, likable people as well as the “bad,” the intolerant, annoying, and downright despicable. The “Reverend” right down to the rapist and the robber. Our heavenly Father loves them all! That is **“Tough” Love!**

Jesus calls us to **love** just like that; just like God's love! Listen again to Jesus' words from our text, **“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” (v. 44-45).** That is not how the world loves. It's not human nature to show this kind of love. By nature we only want to show love and kindness to those who are loving and kind to us. Jesus reminds us in our text that even the godless pagans of this world love like that: **“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?”** But God does not call us to love like other people do, or how unbelievers do. He calls us to a much higher love—yes, a much **“tougher” love: His** love, PERFECT love! Jesus closes our text with a quote from our Old Testament reading, **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48).**

Think of how imperfectly we love instead—especially when it comes to those who don't love us, those who “have it in for us,” for *whatever* reason, people we are afraid of, and those people we just plain can't stand. Think of how often we want nothing to do with putting this kind of **“Tough” Love** into practice—not even wanting to *attempt* to do it in our daily life! It should make us drop to our knees and realize just how much we *still* need God's **“Tough” Love**, His forgiveness, and His Spirit's renewal in our hearts and minds.

Contrast that now with the love of Jesus. Jesus doesn't call us to do anything He hasn't already done for us Himself. “Walk a mile in His shoes” and think of how **“tough”** the **love** was that He showed. Think of His untiring compassion for the sick and injured, His willingness to welcome and spend time with the outcasts and scum of society. Think of His patience with His enemies, His consistent attempts to draw them to Himself and His forgiveness through His **“Tough” Love**. Think of His betrayal, His suffering—all of it—think of His cross. Listen to Him cry out for those who nailed Him there, for every man, woman, and child who's ever had the stains of sin on their soul, **“Father, forgive them...” (Luke 23:34).** That is **“Tough” Love!** Thank God that He showed us this **“Tough” Love** in Jesus, our Savior. May God help us all to reflect this **“Tough” Love** to our neighbors—all of them! Amen.