

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
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**WHAT THE WORLD THINKS ABOUT THE CHURCH...  
AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

**Matthew 5:43-48**

You will recall, I hope, that when Jesus gave His disciples the new commandment to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34), He told them that it was by the quality of their love that the world would see and know that they really were His disciples (13:35). What was true then is still true here and now. Jesus has given to the world outside the church the right to judge the church – the right to make a judgment about the genuineness of our claim to be followers of Jesus – on the basis of our observable, demonstrable love for one another. It is by our love for one another, and our love for others, or the lack of it, that the world will judge whether or not our claims to love God and to be disciples of Jesus are really true. More than anything else, Jesus said, they will know we are Christians by our love. As Francis Schaeffer said, love – *agape* love, the kind of love with which Jesus loved us – is “the mark of the Christian.” Our love for each other and for our neighbors in need is to be the thing that sets us apart from the world outside the church.

I suspect that I am not telling you anything you don't already know, though *knowing* it and *living* it are far different things. It is one thing to affirm this truth in the abstract. It is another thing completely to live it out in the nitty-gritty of daily life, especially if you feel like your world is full of people who are hard to love.

The question is unavoidable: Is love really the thing that sets the church apart from the world around us? Is love – generous, sacrificial love, the kind of love Jesus modeled in His earthly life – the thing that makes us different from our neighbors? Is love likely to be the first thing that comes to mind when people outside the church are asked what they think of Christians? If we were arrested and put on trial for being followers of Jesus, and it was on the basis of a demonstrable lifestyle of Christ-like love that we were to be found guilty or acquitted, would there be enough evidence to convict us? This has implications for each of us personally. And it has implications for all of us together. It has implications for us as the people of Faith Church, and it has implications for the whole of Christ's church spread throughout the world.

To say that love is the indispensable, distinguishing mark of the Christian is not to say that it is the only thing that sets us apart from the world outside the church. Faith matters, too. Our faith in the triune God – God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is central to our identity as Christians. A personal and living faith in Jesus Christ as the true Son of God and Savior of sinners is essential to our experience of God's saving grace and to our ongoing life as followers of Christ in the world. Faith matters so much that without it, the Bible says, “it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). Without faith, you cannot please God. It is as simple as that. The Bible is clear that faith is essential for salvation. Salvation comes by grace and only by grace – the grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. And this salvation is received through faith and only through faith in Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross for us.

Faith is not optional for followers of Christ. It is essential. But remember what Paul says at the end of his magnum opus on love in 1 Corinthians 13: “Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love” (13:13). Paul is not saying that faith and hope are unimportant or insignificant in the life of a Christian. He is not saying that faith is a non-essential. It is absolutely not a non-essential. Faith matters. The fact that you believe, that you trust, in Christ matters. As does the content of your faith. In saying that “the greatest of these is love,” Paul is simply echoing the words of Jesus about the primacy of love in the life of a Christian. Faith in Christ, if it is genuine, must be expressed in acts of love. It is as simple as that.

Love is to be the defining quality, the distinguishing mark, of your life and mine. The world outside the church is to be able to tell that we belong to Jesus by the love we have for one another. That is what Jesus said (John 13:35).

Of course, that is not all Jesus had to say about love. When asked to name the greatest of all the commandments, Jesus said that, after love for God, no commandment is more important than love for our neighbor (Mark 12:28-31). The command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is found in Leviticus 19:18. It had been part of the fabric of Jewish life for centuries. Most Jews understood the word “neighbor” to apply only to their fellow Jews. They interpreted the commandment as an obligation to love their fellow Jews, and no one else. In the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), however, Jesus expanded the meaning of “neighbor” to include anyone in need whom we have the ability and opportunity to help. Not just our families and friends. Not just “our kind of people”. Not just people we like or people who like us. Not just people who dress like us or talk like us or vote like us or believe like us. Anyone in need whom we have the ability and opportunity to help – to love – is our neighbor. Period. I’m not sure we understand how radical this enlargement of the meaning of the word “neighbor” must have seemed to 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews. It *was* radical. And the fact is, it still *is* radical today, if you are seriously serious about actually loving your neighbors, close at hand and far away, when it is convenient and when it is not.

“Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31). It is a tall order. But there is more. Look at what Jesus says in Matthew 5:43-44:

*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.*

“Love your neighbor and hate your enemy” was apparently a well-known precept among the Jews. However, it is not found in the Bible. “Love your neighbor” – yes; but “hate your enemy” – no. Nowhere does the Bible instruct or authorize us to hate our enemies. But that is how many of the Jews misconstrued the meaning of the commandment. Far from hating our enemies, or treating them with contempt, or retreating into a kind of Christian isolationism, Jesus calls His followers to actually love our enemies and to pray for them (5:44). He gives a theological rationale for it in verse 45, pointing to what Calvin referred to as “common grace,” the kindness and favor that God showers on all people, both the righteous and the unrighteous alike. God’s “common grace” bestowed indiscriminately on all people is

contrasted with His “special grace,” that is, the saving grace and the sustaining grace He lavishes on those He has chosen to be His very own people for time and eternity. It is the saving and keeping grace, once again, that comes free of charge to people like me (and you) who don’t deserve it and never will.

Jesus then goes on in verses 46 and 47 to make clear what should have been intuitively obvious to the most casual observer but wasn’t, and too often isn’t, because of eyes that are spiritually blind and hearts that are calloused. If you only love people who love you, Jesus says, what is the big deal about that? If you help only those who help you, do you think you deserve a medal? Do you think you should get some kind of reward for being nice to people who are nice to you? Tax collectors, pagans, anybody can do that.

We all know it is not hard to love people who are loving and lovely and lovable. It is no hardship to love those who are easy to love. Anybody can do it. I have mentioned to you before what Frederick Buechner says about different kinds of love in his book *The Magnificent Defeat*. Regarding this kind of reciprocal love, he writes that “the world smiles” in its approval of it.

“The love of the less fortunate,” Buechner continues, “is a beautiful thing – the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This,” he says, “is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.” Not to mention that compassion is a reflection of the heart of our Heavenly Father, who is, as the Bible tells us again and again, “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Psalm 103:8).

Buechner then goes on to describe another kind of love: “The love for the more fortunate,” he writes, “is a rare thing – to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice.” It is “the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world,” he says, “is always bewildered by its saints.

“And then,” writes Buechner, “there is the love for the enemy – love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain.” It is “the tortured’s love for the torturer. This is God’s love. It conquers the world.”

This *is* God’s love, isn’t it? Isn’t it precisely the love of Jesus for a world filled with rebels, each of whom has gone astray and turned to their own way? (Isaiah 53:6) Isn’t it precisely the love of Jesus for you and me? Look where the love of Jesus for His enemies got Him.

The call of Jesus to us to love our enemies is unavoidable. In his famous book *The Cost of Discipleship*, German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man who knew what it was to have enemies and to be an enemy, stated forcefully what it means for us to love our enemies. “In the New Testament,” he wrote, “our enemies are those who harbor hostility against us” and not vice-versa, for Jesus does not allow His followers to “cherish hostility” against anyone. Hostility toward other persons is not permitted toward other persons at any time. As Paul reminds us in Romans 12, we are not to repay evil for evil or to seek revenge on someone who has mistreated us (12:17, 19). Our behavior, Bonhoeffer said, must not be

determined by the way others treat us, but by the treatment we ourselves have received from Jesus and receive from Him even now (Bonhoeffer 164).

This really is radical stuff. It takes us way beyond the place where most of us live, and way beyond the place where we *want* to live. At least, it is where I live most of the time. In speaking of Jesus' command to love our enemies and of the law of non-resistance and non-retaliation that comes right before it in Matthew 5 (verses 38-42), John Stott says: "Nowhere is the challenge of the Sermon [on the Mount] greater. Nowhere is the distinctiveness of the Christian counter-culture more obvious. Nowhere is our need of the power of the Holy Spirit (whose first fruit is love) more compelling" (Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture* 103).

The bar is set so high that it is impossible for us to do it apart from the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. We are *not* able. But God *is* able. He is more than able to do immeasurably more than all we can ever ask or think or hope or dream or imagine, according to His power that is at work in us (Ephesians 3:20). Which means that by His power of His love, we *can* love our enemies. We *can* pray for those who think the worst of us and seek to do us evil. We *can* bless those who curse us or otherwise speak evil of us (Luke 6:28). We *can* do good to those who hate us and what we believe in as followers of Jesus (Luke 6:27).

Is it possible to love people who consider themselves homosexual, for example, without giving approval to "same-sex marriage" or supporting other aspects of the gay rights agenda? What happens very often in the media and political culture of America today is that those who express opposition to "same-sex marriage" are labeled homophobic and accused of hating gays. I don't know if it has happened to you, but it has happened to plenty of people.

The truth is that too many times, too many Christians have spoken and acted in unloving, even hateful, ways toward gays, and toward others, too, with whose beliefs, views, and conduct we take issue. The truth is that too often, too many Christians have spoken and acted in ugly and utterly un-Christlike ways toward others. The church's track record down through the centuries is far from spotless. We must acknowledge this and humbly repent of our complicity in it.

But we must also understand that disagreement and disapproval do not equal hate. We must also understand that it is possible to deplore and even hate what people do without hating the persons themselves. Some might argue that it is impossible to separate the sin from the sinner, that you cannot hate the sin but still love the sinner, as if to suggest, for example, that you cannot have love in your heart for a sexual predator if you hate pedophilia or rape. But this is absurd. It is simply not so. I believe with all my heart that God loves homosexuals as much as He loves heterosexual sinners and every kind of sinner there is under the sun. God loves our homosexual neighbors every bit as much as He loves you and me. But God does not approve of homosexuality. The Bible is very clear on this. No novel, rationalized interpretations of Scripture can change the truth. God loves homosexuals, but He does not approve of homosexuality, any more than He approves of idolatry or adultery or prostitution or sexual immorality of any kind, or stealing or lying or greed or drunkenness or a veritable plethora of other sins. What is truly remarkable and should amaze us is not that God disapproves of these things, but that He extends His grace to all these kinds of sinners,

including you and me. Paul tells the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 6 that sinners of all these kinds, whatever their pasts, whatever their struggles with sinful desires and patterns, can be redeemed through the blood of Christ. After naming ten different kinds of sinners, Paul says: “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified [made holy], you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11; see 6:9-11).

Hear me clearly, dear friends: God loves homosexuals, and we must, too. The Bible gives us no license to hate another person. In some cases you may properly hate what a person does, but God does not give you or me a license to hate that person or any person.

The Bible says unequivocally that there are some things God hates. For example, in Malachi 2:16, the Lord says: “I hate divorce, and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence.” God *hates* divorce, but God *loves* divorced men and women, and the children of divorced parents. God *hates* violence as a way of life, but surely God *loves* people who resort to violence without warrant.

In Proverbs 6 we read:

*There are six things the LORD hates,  
seven that are detestable to Him:  
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,  
hands that shed innocent blood,  
a heart that devises wicked schemes,  
feet that are quick to rush into evil,  
a false witness who pours out lies,  
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.  
(Proverbs 6:16-19)*

In Amos 5, the Lord denounces His people Israel because of the insincerity of their religious acts:

*I hate, I despise your religious feasts;  
I cannot stand your assemblies.  
(Amos 5:21)*

In all of these cases, God’s hatred is directed toward particular attitudes or actions. But while hating the action or the attitude, God’s love still extends to His wayward, stiff-necked people.

God hates adultery – because He knows the damage it can do; He hates every form of sexual immorality, homosexual or heterosexual. But He loves adulterers and philanderers and sexual sinners of every kind. God hates sin of every kind, but He loves sinners of every kind. Which is a good thing, or there would be no hope for me or for any of us.

Think of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. This woman had lived a sexually promiscuous life. She had five previous husbands and now was “shacking

up” with someone else. Jesus knew all about her past. He did not approve of the woman’s “lifestyle,” but He did not berate her or shame her. He treated her with dignity. He spoke to her firmly but compassionately, focusing on her spiritual need. He loved the sinner but not the sin.

Or think of the woman in John 8 who was caught in the act of adultery and brought to Jesus by Jewish legalists looking for a way to trap Jesus and catch Him saying something they could use against Him. Jesus did not challenge or dispute the charge made against the woman (though one wonders, if she were “caught in the act,” as they alleged, why they brought only the woman to Jesus; it seems intuitively obvious that there must have been another person – a man – involved in the act with her). As with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus did not attack her. He did not lash out at her in an angry tirade. When her accusers pressed Jesus about what should be done to her, Jesus stooped down without a word and began writing with His finger in the dirt (John 8:6). This, by the way, is the only place in the Gospels that speaks of Jesus writing. What Jesus wrote we don’t know. When He finally spoke, He said to the accusers: “Go ahead and stone her. But let the one among you who is without sin throw the first stone” (8:7). If you know the story, you know what happened: One by one, all of the accusers disappeared. Jesus then spoke tenderly to the woman. He did not condemn her. But neither did He condone her behavior. He did not approve of her behavior, but showed love and grace to her, and charged her to “go now and leave your life of sin” (8:11).

It is this same kind of love for one another, for neighbors, and for enemies and those who consider us enemies to which God calls us. Is this easy? Not in our culture today, it isn’t. It is a delicate and difficult undertaking, and we are likely to be misunderstood. But this is our mission: To treat those who oppose us with dignity, respect, and love without affirming or approving conduct, lifestyles, policies, views, or beliefs that God opposes.

How do we do it? One life at a time. One relationship at a time. One conversation at a time. How do we love our enemies? By praying for them (Matthew 5:44). By doing good to them (Luke 6:27). By blessing them (Luke 6:28). By remembering God’s love for sinners like us and letting His love flow out from us to touch the lives of others.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.