

Title: Be Perfect...in Love!

Theme: Extreme Love

Focal Scripture: Matt. 5:43-48

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Tommy once served in a congregation that had a large Christian school and daycare center, a complex operation with many challenges such as lawsuits, wild animals on the playground, and students needing discipline for doing unthinkable things. He didn't think He needed any other challenges when He got the phone call one morning saying that Carol was in the kindergarten nap room and refused to leave.

Carol roamed the streets of their community. She dressed funny—dirty winter coats in the summer and high-top tennis shoes. She smelled bad and her hair was a wild mane of gray. The look in her eyes was often desperate. Carol occasionally attended worship services, but she didn't really connect with many people. Now she was in a bad state, determined to hold her ground in the nap room. The police were called, as they had been numerous times before, to take Carol to a hospital, where she would spend several days under observation in the mental health ward. Tommy felt a twinge of guilt that they had asked the police to remove her, but he also felt responsible to the parents of the children. They needed to keep those youngsters safe from anyone who might be a threat.

Then he heard that “still, small voice” of the Holy Spirit telling him that Carol needed someone to love her. Someone should listen to her story, find out why she lived the way she did, and take an interest in her. He reasoned with the Lord that he had a large ministry to oversee and someone else might be more suited to take care of Carol, but he

couldn't escape God's call to love her. He headed to the hospital to begin a relationship with one of God's treasures. Each week, Carol had a one hour appointment with Tommy in his office. There he heard her story of mental illness, abuse, her husband's abandonment, having her two children years removed from the home because of her mental illness, and the efforts of a kind retired pastor to get her an apartment and manage her finances. He had died a few years earlier, and Carol was on her own again—so God had called Tommy to love her.

She didn't get better immediately; in fact, she got worse. After another of her stints in the hospital (this time for several weeks), He became her guardian advocate. Her doctors and Tommy made the tough decision to send her to the state hospital so that she could be carefully monitored and psychiatrists could develop a care plan for her. Her heart was broken as he helped them load her into the van that would take her there. "Pastor Tommy, please don't do this," she sobbed. He promised her he would make the two-and-a-half hour drive regularly to visit and he would call her each week.

Tommy was privileged to witness Carol's transformation as she got better. She began caring for her clothes, and she really liked shopping. She wanted to look pretty for his visits. She talked about finding her kids and dealing with her past in a positive way. The doctors said she needed to move to an assisted-living facility when she got out of the hospital, so they found the perfect home for her with a young couple. They loved her like family. Tommy had shared his experience with Carol with their congregation in a very transparent way, encouraging them to see her as the treasure that she was. She came back to their church to the cheers and applause of the congregation; she was beaming as she came forward that morning so they could pray for her and express their love for her. He had discovered that Carol knew a good deal of the Bible; she loved the Lord, and she was a prayer warrior. Her ministry

was to sit near their worship pastor during their seasonal events and pray for his hands as he conducted. They celebrated her ministry. God's love transformed Carol, but it also transformed Tommy and their church. They no longer saw her as a threat or an enemy, but as their sister and friend. Carol died of cancer a couple of years ago. She was in her sixties. She had been able to see her children again and greatly enjoyed her last years of life because she knew she was loved. When Tommy preached at her funeral, He wore a black suit that she had insisted on buying him.

We enjoy reading passages of Scripture that tell us God loves us, but sometimes we conveniently overlook the passages that demand that we love like he does. We hear the words of Jesus telling us to "be perfect" and think that's impossible, so I can skip that scripture too. In context, though, we need to see that we are able to accomplish this goal by loving like he does. The great opportunity of the church today is to demonstrate God's perfect love and so reveal Christ to our generation.

Jesus says in *Matthew 5:43–45a*, "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 children of your Father in heaven" (NIV).

I. Who propagated the rumor that Christians can hate certain people?

* I've seen professing Christians who exhibited racial hatred. I lived in a community that used names like Ricans, Whops, Daggos and the list goes on.

- A. The Holy Scriptures do not allow us to behave like that.
 - a. God expects us to mature and to discern truth from rumor.

- b. Then many people who were once our “enemies” can become our friends.
- B. What kind of people have we labeled our “enemies” today?
- a. Which people have we decided are not worthy of love because they have engaged in sin that we can’t tolerate?
 - b. We sometimes put on our smiling faces and say our pat Christian phrases when in reality we don’t love them; we hate them.

* In *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller says, “It is hard for us to realize that when Christianity first arose in the world it was not called a religion. It was the non-religion. The irony of this should not be lost on us, standing as we do in the midst of the modern culture wars. To most people in our society, Christianity is religion and moralism. The only alternative to it (besides some other world religion) is pluralistic secularism. But from the beginning it was not so.” Jesus established the truth about whom we can love and whom we can hate.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” he said. As a group, we haven’t done very well in living out this truth. But Jesus says we need to live by truth rather than rumor when it comes to loving others.

*A white first grader went to her first day at a newly integrated school during the segregation storm of the 1960s. Her anxious mother met her at the door to inquire, “How did everything go, Honey?”

“Oh, Mother, you know what? A little black girl sat next to me!”

In trepidation, the mother asked, “And what happened?”

“We were both so scared that we held hands all day,” the little girl said.

II. The Jews of Jesus' day felt it was perfectly logical to love their fellow Jews and hate Gentiles.

- A. After all, they were God's chosen people.
- B. Sadly, we have adapted their attitude when it comes to all kinds of people unlike ourselves.

* David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyon share in their book *UnChristian* (Baker Books, 2007): "It is clear that Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against... In our national surveys we found the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are anti-homosexual ..., judgmental..., and hypocritical..." (pp 26, 27). Such perceptions are barriers that keep us from connecting with our culture and demonstrating the perfect love of our heavenly Father.

III. But we must have convictions that are biblical.

- A. Jesus did not tell the Jews of his day that they had to abandon their loyalty to the Law or the doctrines of their forefathers.
- B. In fact, Jesus called them to a deeper conviction, a deeper loyalty, and a deeper practice of God's Word.
- C. Every person must come to grips with the reality of what God's Word says about their sin.
 - a. We must never allow those we love to continue in sin without our being concerned; exactly because we love them, we have an opportunity to address their sin.
 - b. And yet, as a people of the Scriptures, we must look beyond people's blatant rebellion against God and love them anyway. We can prepare the way for the Holy Spirit to convict them and bring them to repentance.

- D. Simply loving sinners can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to do his work in their lives, whereas hating and condemning them will only hardens their hearts to his work.
 - a. Our preaching must never shrink from calling to people to godliness and holiness, but God’s truth can be delivered in love.

* Pastor Tommy’s congregation has been attempting to connect with our community in various ways over the last several years. They have a beautiful network of walking, jogging, and bike trails in Nashville, Tennessee called the Greenway. Every day thousands of people utilize the Greenway to try to stay healthy. Saturdays are particularly busy, and during the hot months of the year, there are a lot of thirsty people, so they began distributing cold bottled water to those thirsty people. Of course, they attached a little card to the top of the bottle telling them how to find their church. One lady challenged their volunteers: “You’re doing this for advertising—that’s your agenda.”

Tommy was certainly shocked, but then convicted. They weren’t just there to give water to thirsty people; they were also trying to market their church. She was right, and they were wrong. After that, they took their little tags off the bottles and gave out water with the right heart.

He knew they had gotten their hearts right when he overheard one of their men answer a tough question on the Greenway. A cyclist who took the cold water one Saturday asked, “Why are you doing this?” The volunteer simply responded, “Because we love you.” Shocking! To a rank stranger, he had said, “We love you.” The cyclist was stunned, and Tommy was thrilled!

We aren’t humanly perfect like Jesus, but the moment that we begin to love the unlovable, we have expressed his perfect love. That kind of action, that kind of effort, speaks volumes to those who know that they aren’t in right relationship with God.

It was very natural for Jesus to attend a party of “tax collectors and sinners” at Matthew’s house because he was the living demonstration of what perfect love looks like. When we begin to love others who are alone, isolated, and guilty, we do the same. And then we are doing what we were created to be.

After all, shouldn’t the body of Christ be doing the work of Christ?

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