

119

MINISTRIES

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Love Your Enemies (Matthew 5:43-48)

Why should we love our enemies? In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—answers that question.

In this passage, Yeshua challenges the idea that you should hate your enemy. He says that you should instead *love* your enemy and pray for him. He explains that the sun rises and rain falls on both the unjust and the just, and that loving only those who love you brings no reward since even sinners and pagans do that. The passage concludes with an exhortation to be perfect, just as God is perfect.

This teaching from our Messiah is well known, but it raises some questions. For instance, some have interpreted this passage as an example of Yeshua contradicting the Torah, the Law of Moses. But is that true? Does the Torah say to hate our enemies, and is Yeshua correcting the Torah’s message? Also, why should we love our enemies in the first place? And finally, what does any of this have to do with being “perfect”?

In this teaching, we will examine Matthew 5:43-48 and explore those questions. Let’s jump in.

Matthew 5:43-48

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The first thing we should recognize is that Yeshua is correcting something that his audience has “heard”—namely, that you *should love your neighbor and hate your enemy*. The idea that Yeshua confronts here is that your enemy is not your neighbor, so you are not required to love him. But where did Yeshua’s audience hear this idea? Well, some modern teachers claim that Yeshua’s audience heard this idea from the Law of Moses. They say that the Torah does not teach us to love our enemies, only

our “neighbors.” Hence, they argue that Yeshua contradicts the Law of Moses by telling his listeners that they should love their enemies. R. L. Solberg’s remarks on this passage are representative of this viewpoint:

In the Torah, enemies are fought against, resisted, shattered, and scattered. There are no Torah commands about praying for our enemies or loving them. This is a profound new commandment given by Jesus... This profound posture of humility and sacrificial love for one’s enemies is not found in the Torah.

—R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?* 2nd ed. (Franklin, TN: Williamson College Press, 2022), 96

This perceived contradiction between Yeshua’s teaching and the Torah has led some to argue that Christians should unhitch from the Hebrew Scriptures entirely (See Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 106-107). After all, following both Jesus and Moses at the same time is impossible if they contradict each other. So, based on this apparent contradiction, we are told we must pick one or the other.

Notably, this sentiment is not new. It dates back to the Second-Century teacher Marcion, who taught that the Gospel of Yeshua and the Law of Moses were incompatible. And one of Marcion’s arguments was this exact point—that the Messiah’s command to love your enemies is at odds with the Law of Moses (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.16; *De recta in Deum fide* 1 812d).

But is there really a contradiction between Yeshua’s teachings and God’s Law? Is the concept of loving your enemies really “not found in the Torah”? Maybe we should look at what the Torah actually says about loving your enemy.

What the Torah Says About Loving Our Enemies

There are two things that Yeshua says his audience has heard: one, that you should love your neighbor, and two, that you should hate your enemy. The idea that you should love your neighbor *does* come from the Law of Moses. God explicitly commands us to love our neighbor:

Leviticus 19:18

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*: I am the LORD [YHWH].

When Yeshua was asked about the greatest commandment in the Law, he cited this command to love your neighbor alongside the command to love God (Mark 12:28-31). So, Yeshua agrees with the Torah that we should love our neighbor. There is no contradiction between Yeshua and the Torah on this first point.

But what about the second point, that you should hate your enemy? Does *this* come from the Law of Moses? Actually, it does not. Unlike “**you shall love your neighbor**,” the Torah nowhere says, “you shall hate your enemy.” In fact, it says precisely the opposite. For example:

Exodus 23:4-5

If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving

him with it; you shall rescue it with him.

Here, the Torah explicitly commands us to go out of our way to lovingly help our “enemy” and “one who hates” us. We don’t have the option of selectively helping only those who are kind to us. We must put our feelings aside and help someone in need, even if we consider him our enemy. That sounds a lot like Yeshua’s instructions in Matthew 5:43-48. Instead of loving only those who love us back, the Torah demands that we love even those we consider enemies.

So, there is no contradiction on this second point either. The Torah does not say to hate our enemies; in fact, it explicitly commands us to lovingly help our enemies, which is the same thing that Yeshua taught.

But that raises a question: if the Torah did not teach Yeshua’s audience to hate their enemies, then who did? Who is Yeshua arguing against when he says to love your enemies? According to the overall context, he is arguing against the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees. Right before he goes into all his antithetical sayings—that is, his “You have heard it said...But I say” teachings in verses 21-48—he condemns the inadequate righteousness of the Pharisees in verse 20. He then follows his antithetical sayings with yet another condemnation of the Pharisees’ “righteousness” in Matthew 6:1-18. Hence, it seems clear from the context that, throughout Matthew 5:21-48, Yeshua is opposing the teachings of the Pharisees, not the Law of Moses. He is referencing how the Pharisees misunderstood the Torah, and then countering their teachings by giving the correct interpretation.

As Richard Averbeck writes:

The Hebrew Bible has no command that one should hate his or her enemy. Here it is important to remember that Jesus is not disputing the Law or the Prophets, but rather the way the scribes and Pharisees taught them in his day (Mt 5:20).

—Richard E. Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in Light of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 241

Although the Law of Moses nowhere explicitly commands you to hate your enemy, we know that at least one early Jewish community taught that you should. For instance, the Qumran community explicitly commanded its members to love all the “children of light”—that is, members of their community—and to hate all the “children of darkness”—that is, those they consider enemies (1QS 1.3-4; 9.16, 21-22). That sounds a lot like “[You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy](#).” While we don’t have direct evidence that the Pharisees in Yeshua’s day taught that you should hate your enemy, Yeshua’s reference to what his audience has “heard” suggests that such a teaching was well-known within Second-Temple Judaism.

In any case, it is evident that Yeshua does not contradict nor undermine the Torah when he says to love your enemy. The Torah simply does not say to hate your enemy; it says the opposite. And Yeshua’s agreement with the Torah makes sense when we consider the context. Toward the beginning of his sermon, Yeshua prohibited his listeners from thinking he came to abolish the Torah (Matthew 5:17). Thus, if we read Matthew 5:43-48 as an example of Yeshua contradicting the Torah, we are literally violating Yeshua’s prohibition against thinking that he came to do that. As we’ve established, a more accurate interpretation is that Yeshua contradicts the Pharisees’ teachings, not the Torah.

Why We Love Our Enemies

Yeshua agrees with the Torah that we must love our enemies. But why does he want us to do this? He says, “[so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven](#)” (Matthew 5:45a). In other words, we love our enemies because our Father in heaven loves *his* enemies, and we are to be like our Father. As Yeshua goes on to say, God does not discriminate when it comes to sending natural blessings like sunshine and rain—these blessings are given to both the just and unjust, to his followers and his enemies alike:

Matthew 5:45b

[For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.](#)

As children of our Father in heaven, we should emulate his character by loving those we consider enemies as well as those we consider neighbors. Once again, this principle is rooted in the Torah. As we read earlier, God commands us to lovingly help our enemy when he is in need (Exodus 23:4-5). Like our Father in heaven, we are to meet the needs of both our neighbor and our enemy.

Showing love toward our enemies certainly isn't easy! But that's kind of the point. Loving only those who love you is something that even sinners and pagans do naturally (Matthew 5:46-47). There is no reward in being only as good as sinners and pagans. Yeshua calls us to a higher standard. He calls us to be “perfect,” which brings us to our next point: what does it mean to be “perfect”?

Be Perfect

Matthew 5:48

[You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.](#)

What does Yeshua mean when he says that we must be perfect? Some have taken this statement to mean that Yeshua was demanding moral perfection from his followers. In other words, he was saying that they aren't allowed to make mistakes—they must be totally sinless. Since moral perfection is not possible for us in this life (1 John 1:8, 10; 2:1), this has led some to claim that the Sermon on the Mount is not actually for us today. They say that the Sermon on the Mount was only intended to show us how sinful we are so that we would recognize our need for grace, not to show us how to live.

Obviously, it is true that we all sin and need grace. But that is not the point of this saying from Yeshua. He is not setting up an impossible standard; he really does expect his followers to live out his teachings and to be “perfect.” The misunderstanding stems from an inaccurate interpretation of what Yeshua means by “perfect.” In Greek, the word translated as “perfect” is τέλειος (*teleios*), and in this context it means spiritual maturity and consistent faithfulness. As David Turner writes:

To be perfect (τέλειος, *teleios*) in the immediate context is to be complete or mature in one's approximation of God's benevolence. In the narrative flow of Matt. 5, “perfection” is uprightness and blamelessness in consistently obeying God's law as ultimately interpreted by Jesus... The surpassing righteousness of which Jesus began to speak in 5:20 is summarized here not as sinlessness but as imaging the Father's characteristic of universal benevolence.

—David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 177

So, we are to be perfect. That doesn't mean that Yeshua expects us to be sinless, but it does mean that he expects us to be faithful. Like our Father in heaven, we must be willing to love and help everyone, whether we consider them a neighbor or an enemy.

How can we love our enemies practically?

As we've already discussed, the Torah specifically instructs us to return our enemy's animal that has strayed and to help unload heavy burdens from our enemy's animal (Exodus 23:4-5). In our modern context, the principle behind this law can be applied in numerous ways. If our enemy loses a wallet or a phone, we should return it to him. If we see someone we don't like on the side of the road with a broken-down car, we should offer assistance instead of driving by. The point is that we should do what we can to help others, even people we don't like very much. The Torah says to help "one who hates you," and Yeshua repeats that commandment: "[do good to those who hate you](#)" (Exodus 23:5; Luke 6:27).

Yeshua also gives some additional instructions regarding how to love our enemies. For instance, he says to "[pray for those who persecute you](#)" (Matthew 5:44). Praying for our enemies is part of the process of making us "perfect," like our Father in heaven. When we pray for our enemies, God changes the way we see them. We start humanizing them and having compassion for them. We start seeing them the same way God does.

Additionally, Yeshua tells us to "greet" our enemies. In Yeshua's time, greetings were customary ways of bestowing honor upon someone (Matthew 23:7). That is not something you would want to do to your enemy! Even today, it is much easier to just ignore someone we don't like instead of trying to muster up a "hello" if we bump into them at the grocery store. However, this simple act of respect can break down barriers of hostility. Yeshua is not saying we have to be best friends with our enemies, but we should at the very least be willing to show them kindness. After all, God was kind to us when we didn't deserve it—when we were his enemies. Since we are his children, we should be kind to our enemies as well.

Conclusion

Far from contradicting the Law of Moses, Yeshua's command to love our enemies aligns with the Torah's demand to help even those who hate us. However, in the first century, some were teaching that we should hate our enemies. Yeshua was opposing that teaching; he was not opposing the Law of Moses. As children of our Father in heaven, we are called to love our enemies just as he does. By praying for and greeting our enemies, we emulate God's character, who bestows natural blessings on the just and unjust. We are called to be "perfect"—mature and consistent in our obedience to God's will, and that includes loving our enemies.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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