



Week 7: Jesus & Our Opponents

Matthew 5:43-48

GOAL:

To increasingly love and pray for those we might see as our opponents.

CHECKLIST

- Finalize the date for your Grow Group Prayer Night and send the date to Amy.
- Prepare for your group meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- Share with your group about the "field trip" to Viola's House on November 23 from 8am-12pm. We will tour the ministry and divide into three groups to serve together. Your group can plan lunch together after, if you'd like.
- Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Jesus, your Word says that we previously chose to live as your enemies by turning our backs and rebelling against you. And yet you loved us so completely and unconditionally that you gave your life for us on the cross, making peace for us with God through your blood that was shed on our behalf. Forgive us for the times when we fail to love others with the same complete, unconditional love that you have shown to us. Transform our hearts and minds. Help us to see others as people who are created in your image, deeply loved by you. Create in us the desire to listen and show empathy. Give us humility to remember that we don't see and know everything. Help us to draw near in proximity, so that we can practice the same generous, forgiving love and grace that you have shown to us. Help us to grow in maturity, that we may live more like you, and that others might see you more clearly in us. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

CONNECT, COORDINATE, & PRAY

To catch up with your group members and to identify where they might need prayer or support, ask your group, “What has brought you joy this week, and what’s a challenge you’re facing?” Go around the room and give each person a chance to respond. Then spend time praying for your group members and for your time together today.

Take time to coordinate details and plans for:

- Grow Group Prayer Night - send date to Amy, use “Prayer Experience #3” on GG Leader Tools page
- Viola’s House Serve Day - Saturday, November 23, 8am-12pm (details in Wednesday’s leader email)

DISCUSS

- In your family, who do you look like or act like?

Read Matthew 5:43-44.

- Jesus contrasts the common belief (“Love your neighbor, hate your enemy”) with His radical call to love and pray for enemies. What’s your natural reaction when you face someone who opposes you or hurts you? Why is loving and praying for your enemies so hard to do?

Leaders: *Let’s be honest and real: it is difficult to love someone who opposes or hurts us. It doesn’t feel just. It doesn’t satisfy my need to retaliate, or take vengeance, or inflict pain, or be right. It’s natural to feel defensive and hurt. And it’s easy to move toward anger, avoidance, or even retaliation.*

As you lead this conversation in your group, recognizing these emotions is the first step toward understanding why Jesus’ command is so challenging. It’s important for us to see that none of us are alone in struggling to love our enemies. By admitting this together, you can help create an atmosphere of humility, grace, and vulnerability in your group that will set the stage for the rest of this conversation.

The way of the world is to love our friends and hate our enemies. Apparently, for Jesus’ listeners, this was so commonplace that it had become a saying that everyone recognized. “Hate your enemy” is not found in Scripture. But when we don’t know Scripture well, we can have a tendency to morph Scriptural principles into what we think it ought to say (like the phrase we often hear today, “God helps those who help themselves”). The Jews were okay with loving their neighbors (other Jews) but not with loving their enemies (Gentiles). They were basically saying, “Love your fellow Jews who look and think and act like you, and hate everybody else.” The Jews were looking for a Messiah, but not

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

one that says ‘love your enemies.’ They want one who will take vengeance on their enemies and put them in first place once and for all. However, Jesus is calling us to rise above these instincts and trust that God is the ultimate judge. His justice is far greater than our sense of fairness, and he invites us to leave vengeance to him (Romans 12:19).

But again, let’s be honest. This “love your neighbors; hate your enemies” mindset isn’t limited to first-century Jews. All of us find it easier to love those who look and think and act like us, and to consider those who misunderstand us, hurt us, or oppose us as our enemies. And our categories are not nearly as clearly defined as Jew vs Gentile. Sometimes the ones we most strongly oppose are our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ!

Maybe, for some of us, it can be hard to relate to the extremism of the word ‘hate’ or ‘enemies.’ You or your group members might be thinking, “I don’t hate anybody.” But to a lesser extreme, we can recognize that there are things we don’t like about them, or they don’t like about us. We might feel animosity or opposition toward a person or a group, perhaps driven by fear, insult, or injury.

Social media makes this problem worse. It magnifies conflict by providing a platform for people to express their frustrations or anger publicly and often impulsively, and without accountability. When someone hurts or opposes us, instead of working through it privately or face-to-face, social media gives us the temptation to vent to a large audience. We want to prove our point and prove someone else wrong. On top of that, many social media platforms operate on algorithms that reinforce echo chambers—spaces where we are primarily exposed to opinions and people who think like us. When our news feeds are filled with content that affirms our views and demonizes those who disagree, we become more entrenched in “us vs. them” thinking. We become far more likely, as Pastor John warned, to exaggerate, denigrate, or isolate.

Loving and praying for enemies is something we cannot do in our own strength. It is a supernatural act enabled by God’s grace. Jesus doesn’t call us to do this alone—he equips us through the Holy Spirit. Encourage your group to see Jesus’ teaching not as an impossible burden but as an invitation to rely more deeply on God.

- Have you ever been forgiven something significant or had to extend forgiveness? Share about that experience.

Leaders: This question is intended to remind us of the ways that we have been shown grace and mercy, and of the ways that God has previously given us the strength and courage to extend forgiveness even when it is hard. This will also “prime the pump” for people engaging in the conversation, especially as we move into the questions that follow.

- What are some practical ways we can pray for people who have hurt us?

Leaders: Your group members may need to be reminded how much prayer can accomplish. Emphasize that praying for our enemies is a powerful, transformative act. Encourage your group to see

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

prayer as both a form of obedience and a tool for personal growth. When we pray for those who hurt us, it's not only for their sake but also for ours. Prayer softens our hearts and opens the door for God to change us. Even if the other person never changes, we experience peace and freedom from the burden of hatred and bitterness. Help your group see that prayer shifts the focus from our pain and the person who caused it to God's healing work within us.

It may be challenging to brainstorm how to pray for a particular person we have in mind who has hurt us. At this stage in the conversation, keep the conversation more general as you brainstorm ways that anyone can do this. We will ask a similar question later in the lesson that is more personally targeted.

Here are a few ideas:

- **Pray for Their Well-Being:** Start by praying for the person's physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Even if it feels unnatural at first, asking God to bless them and provide for their needs can help soften our hearts.
- **Pray for Healing and Forgiveness (for You and Them):** Pray for healing of any bitterness or unforgiveness in your own heart and for the person who hurt you to also find healing. It's important to remember that forgiveness benefits both the person offering it and the one receiving it.
- **Pray for Reconciliation and Understanding:** Ask God to bring about reconciliation, whether it's through a conversation, an apology, or simply a change in both of your hearts. You can also pray for greater understanding of why the person acted the way they did.
- **Pray for Their Growth and Blessing:** It can be powerful to pray for God to change the heart of the person who hurt you, but also to ask God to bless their life in unexpected ways. Think about what God might want for this person, and pray for that. This aligns your heart with God's love for them, regardless of their actions.
- **Pray for Yourself to Grow:** Ask God to help you grow in love and grace through the situation. Loving your enemies is difficult, and it requires God's strength. Pray for the ability to reflect God's character even when it's hard.

Read Matthew 5:45-47.

- What is true of us if we love our enemies (according to verse 45)? Why is loving our enemies evidence of this truth about us? What does it mean for us to mirror God's character in the way we treat others?

Leaders: Jesus teaches that loving our enemies reflects our identity as God's children. This doesn't mean anything they've said or done is okay. Instead, it means that regardless of the way they've treated us, we are to forgive them and treat them as Christ forgave and treated us. Consider these Scriptures:

- **Ephesians 4:32-5:2** Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

to God.

- **Colossians 1:21-22** Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.
- **Luke 6:27-28** But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.
- **Romans 12:20-21** On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
- **Romans 13:10** Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

The second part of Matthew 4:45 means that God wills our absolute good, whether or not our hearts are turned toward him. In theological terms, this is called "common grace." It's the grace of God that is extended to all people, regardless of their faith or their relationship with God. It is the general goodness and blessings God bestows upon humanity—such as the beauty of nature, the provision of food, health, and social order. Common grace includes the restraint of evil in society and the moral capacities people have, even if they do not acknowledge or follow God. Common grace is universal and is part of God's sustaining care for his creation.

We are beneficiaries of God's common grace. Thank goodness, because none of us are 100% good all the time! Isn't it good of God to treat us generously and graciously even when we don't deserve it?!? This is also true of those who have wronged us and those who have turned their backs on God or on us. God wills and provides for their good just the same. How can we be more like that? How can we desire absolute good for those who have hurt us?

Consider these words from Dallas Willard ,

[Love] seeks what is best. That is why it enables a person to refrain from hating their enemy, which they might very well want to do, and to seek what is good for them along with all others involved. This certainly does not mean you just give in and do what the enemy (or friend) wants or let them have their way. That might be the worst thing you could do to them.

What Willard is saying is that love doesn't require us to agree or to subject ourselves to unkind or unfair treatment. Instead, love requires that we treat each person as God treats us.

Willard also says that love is not a "per person" predisposition. In other words, if our love is conditional, it is not truly love. Scripture says that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). If we are to "be love" also, rather than just treat certain people in a loving way, then it must become part of who we are, all the time and to everyone. Unconditional love is a character trait that we cultivate through the help of the Holy Spirit, which manifests itself equally in whatever person or situation we encounter. Commenting on Philippians 4, Willard writes:

Paul understood the fallacy of those who say "I just can't love so and so," and there they stop and give up on love. He knew that they were working at the wrong level. They should not try to

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

love that person but try to become the kind of person who would love them. Only so can the ideal of love pass into a real possibility and practice. Our aim under love is not to be loving to this or that person, or in this or that kind of situation, but to be a person possessed by love as an overall character of life, whatever is or is not going on. The “occasions” are met with from that overall character. I do not come to my enemy and then try to love them, I come to them as a loving person.

Love is not a faucet to be turned on or off at will. God himself doesn't just love me or you, he is love. He is creative will for all that is good. That is his identity, and explains why he loves individuals, even when he is not pleased with them. We are directed by Paul to “be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave himself up for us.” (Eph. 5:1 – 2) We are called and enabled to love as God loves.

That is God's character, and he created us in his image to be like him. God forgives us, and he can enable us to forgive. God is generous, and God teaches us to be generous too. It's not always easy. Instead, it is a journey of being formed into the likeness and love of Jesus.

- How should our conduct with regard to our enemies differ from the world around us (according to vs. 46-47)? How would you answer the four questions Jesus' poses in these two verses?

Leaders: *Jesus challenges his followers to go beyond the world's standard of love, highlighting that our conduct should be radically different. The world typically loves those who are easy to love—friends, family, or those who treat us well. But Jesus calls us to a higher standard: loving those who oppose or mistreat us, which reflects God's unconditional love. Let's examine how we might answer the four questions Jesus poses in these verses:*

- **"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?"**
The world often operates on a transactional basis—people love those who love them back, expecting reciprocity. Jesus points out that this is no different from what the rest of the world does. We cannot expect any kind of heavenly reward for this. The Christian call is to love others without expecting anything in return, reflecting God's grace, which is freely given.
- **"Are not even the tax collectors doing that?"**
In Jesus' time, tax collectors were seen as morally corrupt because they often exploited their own people. Jesus uses them as an example of the lowest common denominator in society—if even they can love those who love them, then there's nothing extraordinary about that kind of love. What's interesting is that Jesus' words here are recorded by Matthew, the disciple who was a tax collector before he became Jesus' disciple! Think about how Matthew's life was changed by an encounter with Jesus. And think about how the disciples treated Matthew. The implication is that Christ's followers are called to a much higher ethic, to love even when it's difficult, inconvenient, or undeserved.
- **"If you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?"**
As we've learned from Ephesians, the church is to be a prototype for the world of God's new

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

creation, of how God has created and enabled us to live differently. One of the ways this should be most evident is in the way we interact with others who are different from us. Greeting in this context refers to showing kindness or warmth. Hospitality was a major part of this culture, just as it is for many of the neighbors who are moving into our own community. Jesus asks his disciples to consider whether they are doing anything that sets them apart if they only show hospitality to those they are comfortable with. The world already greets its "own people," but Christians are called to step outside of their comfort zones. True Christian love extends even to those who are different, difficult, or hostile.

- **"Do not even pagans do that?"**

Jesus points out that non-believers (referred to as "pagans") also show love to those who are like them. If Jesus' followers only do what everyone else is doing, how are they living differently as citizens of God's Kingdom? This question pushes us to reflect on the distinctive nature of Christ-like love—love that seeks the good of others, even enemies, and reaches beyond the boundaries of social, racial, or religious groups.

Help your group brainstorm some Scriptural truths that speak to our own standing and how we are to treat our "enemies." Here are some examples:

- Luke 10:29-37 – Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan
- Romans 2:1-6 – God's kindness that leads us to repentance
- Romans 5:10-11 – reconciliation through Jesus
- 1 Timothy 1:12-17 – our salvation is an example to others of Christ's mercy

As you reflect on the Scripture from 1 Timothy 1, is loving our enemies a better reflection of Jesus than loving our friends? We can only fully understand God's love once we choose to love our enemies. Our conduct should reflect God's radical and inclusive love. While the world might justify hatred or indifference toward enemies, Christians are called to extend grace, mercy, and kindness to all—even those who mistreat us. In doing so, we bear witness to the love of God that is undeserved and transformative. We aren't just to love those who are easy to love, but also those who are difficult, in a way that breaks the cycle of retribution and models the gospel.

- Think of someone who might be considered an "enemy" in your life—someone who opposes or hurts you, or someone difficult for you to love. How can you begin to pray for them this week?

Leaders: Use the ideas you brainstormed more generally earlier in the lesson, and now help your group to apply it to a particular circumstance or person in their own life.

Remind the group that loving and praying for enemies is something we cannot do in our own strength. It is a supernatural act enabled by God's grace. Jesus doesn't call us to do this alone—He equips us through the Holy Spirit.

Encourage the group to see this teaching not as an impossible burden but as an invitation to rely more deeply on God. Lead them in discussing practical ways to start small, such as praying simple

prayers for people who have hurt them, asking God to work in their hearts, and trusting Him to bring healing and growth over time.

Read Matthew 5:48.

- What is the standard that Jesus calls us to? How should we interpret Jesus' call to be perfect?

Leaders: *This question takes us back to where we started with our opening question – who do you look like? Is the image of the Father visible in us? Is there a family resemblance? If you're reading along in the Growth Guide, on Wednesday this week we read Galatians 3:26-28, where Paul talks about us being descendants and heirs through faith. We are part of God's family, and we are meant to bear the family resemblance. As Galatians 3:27 says, "for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."*

As Pastor John pointed out, Jesus isn't talking about moral perfection. None of us could live up to that standard. Even with the Holy Spirit's transformative work in us, all of us are going to mess up. Instead, the Greek word translated "perfect" (teleios) means complete, full grown, having reached its end.

Jesus' command to be perfect should be seen as an ongoing process rather than an expectation of immediate moral flawlessness. We are called to continually grow in Christlikeness, becoming more like God in how we love and live. It's a lifelong journey of sanctification, where God works in us to transform our hearts and minds (Philippians 1:6).

It's important to recognize that this call to perfection cannot be achieved by human effort alone. We are dependent on God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to live out this kind of love and righteousness. Jesus sets a high standard, but he also provides the means for us to pursue it through His Spirit working within us. This call to perfection, therefore, is an invitation to deeper reliance on God, recognizing that we cannot love like this on our own.

- What steps can we take to grow in maturity, especially when it comes to loving others?

Leaders: *Encourage your group toward practical application. By naming things you can put into practice this week, you are encouraging your people toward life change. As James 1:22 says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." Here are some ways we can do what we've talked about today:*

- **Spend Time with God in Prayer and Scripture**

The foundation of growing in maturity is deepening our relationship with God. As we spend time in prayer and Scripture, we are transformed by God's love and perspective. Through consistent prayer, we can ask God to shape our hearts to reflect his character, especially in difficult situa

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

tions. Meditating on passages that focus on God's love, such as 1 Corinthians 13, can help us understand what Christlike love looks like and apply it to our lives.

Practical Step: Set aside daily time for reflection and prayer, asking God to give you a heart that loves others unconditionally, even those who are hard to love.

- **Put Jesus First**

True maturity begins with putting Jesus at the center of everything we do. Ephesians 2:20 says that Jesus is our chief cornerstone, our true foundation, the one the rest of the building relies on for our strength and stability. So we can only grow in spiritual maturity when we put Jesus at the center of our lives. When Jesus is the focus of our lives, then our priorities, decisions, and actions align with his teachings and example. By keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, we are reminded of his sacrificial love, his humility, and his grace toward us, which empowers us to love others in the same way. As we grow in our relationship with him, his love flows through us more naturally.

Practical Step: Regularly reflect on Jesus' life and love by spending time in the Gospels. Ask yourself, "How would Jesus respond in this situation?" and invite him into every decision, relationship, and challenge you face, making Jesus the guiding influence in your life.

- **Practice Forgiveness**

One key to growing in love is learning to forgive others as Christ has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32). Holding onto bitterness or grudges hinders our ability to love others. Forgiveness is an intentional choice, not necessarily a feeling, and it often requires God's help. By practicing forgiveness regularly, we release the hold that past hurts have on us, allowing room for healing and for love to grow.

Practical Step: Make a list of people you struggle to forgive and begin praying for each person, asking God to help you release bitterness and forgive them from the heart.

- **Cultivate Empathy**

Empathy—putting ourselves in someone else's shoes—is crucial for growing in love and maturity. When we make an effort to listen and understand others' perspectives, experiences, and feelings, we are better able to show compassion, even toward those who challenge or hurt us. Empathy helps break down barriers and allows us to see people not just as adversaries, but as fellow human beings loved by God. By actively listening and seeking to understand others, we can respond with greater grace and patience.

Practical Step: In your interactions, especially with those who are difficult to love, pause to consider their perspective. Ask yourself, "What might they be going through?" or "How would I feel in their situation?" Ask questions to gain deeper understanding, and choose to believe the best before reacting.

- **Seek Humility**

Maturity in love requires humility—recognizing that we could be wrong, and putting the needs of others before our own. Philippians 2:3-4 encourages us to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves." To grow in this, we need to consciously choose to think of others' needs and desires, rather than always focusing on our own. Serving others, even in small ways, helps us develop this attitude of selflessness.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

Practical Step: Look for opportunities to serve someone in your life each day—whether by offering help, listening, or simply showing kindness when it’s not expected.

- **Choose Love, and Act On It**

Love is not just a feeling; it’s a choice. Sometimes, especially with difficult people, we need to choose to act in love even when we don’t feel like it. This might mean showing kindness to someone who has hurt you, or helping someone you disagree with. By practicing these loving actions, we train our hearts to follow Christ’s command, and over time, our feelings may align with our actions.

Practical Step: Take one specific action this week to show love to someone who has been difficult for you—whether by offering a kind word, a thoughtful gesture, or simply praying for them.

- **Rely on the Holy Spirit**

Growing in maturity and love is not something we can accomplish through willpower alone. We need the Holy Spirit to transform us from the inside out (Galatians 5:22-23). As we yield to the Spirit’s leading, we become more patient, kind, and loving in ways that go beyond our natural abilities. Being filled with the Spirit allows us to love others in a supernatural way, even when our human nature resists.

Practical Step: Ask the Holy Spirit daily to guide your thoughts, words, and actions, and to produce God’s fruit in your life, especially in how you relate to others.

- **Seek Proximity**

Loving those who are easy to love doesn’t stretch us in the same way as loving those who challenge us. To grow in maturity, we need to engage with people who are different from us—whether it’s in personality, opinion, or background. Building these relationships helps us practice love and patience, as we learn to see others through God’s eyes. And if we are modeling Christ’s truth and character, maybe we can influence others for Christ through our friendship.

Practical Step: Intentionally reach out to someone who is different from you or with whom you’ve had a difficult relationship, seeking to understand their perspective and build a bridge.

PRAY

Let’s put this lesson into practice as we pray.

1. Invite the group to spend time thank Jesus for loving us and showing us grace and mercy, even when we were his “enemies.”
2. Ask each person to think about someone they have a hard time loving. Ask them to take a moment to remember how God feels about this person. Then have them ask themselves what God wants for this person. Finally, invite them to pray silently for that person.
3. Either in small groups or all together, invite everyone to pray aloud for your group and for our church as they feel led. Ask God to help us to love our “enemies” in the same way that Christ loved us and gave himself for us.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25