SIXTH ANTITHESIS

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, in order that you may be children of your heavenly Father, because he makes his sun rise upon both evil and good people and he makes it rain upon the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same thing? And if you greet only the members of your community, what rewardable thing have you done? Don't even the Gentiles do the same thing? You, therefore, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."
Matthew 5:43-48

The question of the relation of the Christian to his enemies . . . Precisely here we are so completely without understanding, and, left to ourselves, our ideas are so totally perverted that our text (Romans 12:17-21) begins: 'Don't consider yourselves 'clever' . . . When you confront your enemy think first of all about your own enmity with God and about God's compassion towards you.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a 1938 sermon; "Love your Enemies"

This is the sixth and last antithesis and provides us with the ascending ideal Jesus asks of his Kingdom followers.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
Matthew 5:3

"You, therefore, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."
Matthew 5:48

The listener has risen considerably in this sermon. At the beginning of it the hearers were with the poor in spirit; here at the end of chapter 5, they are with the *perfectly mature.*

At the beginning, they were in the valley. Now they are at the summit. Throughout the Beatitudes the hearers were in deep need. Now in the Commands they are on high assignment.

And yet the two poles of this Matthean chapter, while distant spatially, are not so distant spiritually. The shortest route to the First Beatitude is to take Jesus' last command seriously. As we have seen, it is one of the purposes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, at every sentence, to drive its hearers back to the Beatitudes. "We move forward by going backward."
Brunner – Matthew, page 266

This final antithesis is climactic in its emphasis on loving one's enemies and in its concluding call to the perfection of the Father. The practice of love is the most fundamental element of the Christian ethic. Here the call to love is extended to one's enemies. There is thus a summarizing aspect to this antithesis that includes all the ethical teaching of the preceding antitheses.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
Matthew 5:43

The phrase, *"You shall love your neighbor"* is taken verbatim from the Old Testament.

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.
Leviticus 19:18

Note that Matthew omits the words *as yourself* most likely so that his phrasing fits a more fluid parallel with the second part of this verse *hate your enemy.'*

The phrase *"hate your enemy"* is not taught in the Old Testament but is an inference that was commonly drawn from other data points in the Old Testament.

Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies.
Psalm 139:21-22

I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked.
Psalm 26:5

And the LORD your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you.
Deuteronomy 30:7

To love all that he has chosen and to hate all that He has rejected; to distance oneself from every evil man and to hold fast to all men of justice.
1QS 1:4 Dead Sea Scroll

What Matthew has in mind here in the hatred of enemies, is for the believer to so love God that they hate the godless.

In this way, the language of Matthew could be read this way: *"You shall hate the enemy of God."*

There is an understandable and spiritual nature to such an idea.

And if such was the case among those Jesus was speaking to, they would have had no trouble hearing and understanding the context of the phrase, *"hate your enemies"* nor would they have argued against their embrace of it.

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, in order that you may be children of your heavenly Father, because he makes his sun rise upon both evil and good people and he makes it rain upon the just and the unjust.
Matthew 5:44-45

The antithesis Jesus proposes, on the other hand, must have truly stunned those who heard it. Not only does he command the listeners to *"love your enemies,"* but he adds to this difficulty by commanding his followers to *"pray for those who persecute you."*

This would have been revolutionary. In Jewish tradition there was no parallel. The closest one can get to this attitude is found in the Old Testament.

> *You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*
> *Leviticus 19:34*

> *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.*
> *Exodus 23:4-5*

This attitude of love towards one's enemies is of vital importance to the very identity of the disciple. So important in fact, that Jesus stresses it is necessary for this unrestricted love to be manifested for one to be a child of the Father.

Those who participate in the Kingdom relate to the Father in a unique way. That unique way involves doing his will and in this manner, the children of God reflect the character of their Father.

> *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.*
> *Ephesians 5:1*

> *Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them.*
> *Romans 12:14*

> *and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.*
> *1 Corinthians 4:12*

> *Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.*
> *1 Peter 3:9*

Jesus adds a fact to this ideal of loving one's enemies by stating that the heavenly Father gives his good gifts of sunshine and rain both to good and bad.

The variations in the phrasing of *good and bad, just and unjust*, represent stylistic variation. The *"bad"* are, from the context, analogous to the *"enemies"* of God. To love one's enemies is, then, to treat them as God treats those who have rebelled against him.

The children who are also the disciples, should imitate their heavenly Father.

> *For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same thing? And if you greet only the members of your community, what rewardable thing have you done? Don't even the Gentiles do the same thing?*
> *Matthew 5:46-47*

These are illustrative examples that make a point, and the point Jesus pierces here is that nothing wonderful has been accomplished when one returns good for good.

This is the standard of the world that even the low and despised tax collectors and Gentiles practice.

The ethical standard of the Kingdom calls the disciples to a much more radical love. It is a love that includes even one's enemies – the unrighteous and the evil.

> *Matthew also links tax collectors and Gentiles in 18:17 ("tax collectors" is linked with "sinners" in 9:10, 11; 11:19; in 21:31-32 the word is twice linked with "harlots"). This negative use of "Gentiles," is found elsewhere in Matthew (eg., 6:7; 18:17) and reflects the Jewish orientation of the evangelist's community.*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 135*

The idea of *"greet"* in the above verse combined with the parallel of *"love"* would be read as something like *"wish peace and blessing upon"*, or *"show favor toward."*

Also, the word *"reward"* and the reality behind it is far more important to Matthew which once more reflects the author's Jewish framework.

> *You, therefore, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."*
> *Matthew 5:48*

This verse not only sums up the command to love your enemies but seems to frame the entirety of all six antitheses within its covering.

The disciples are to be perfect. The command here is not suggestive.

The righteousness of the Kingdom, which altogether exceeds that of the Pharisees, involves a call to be perfect like the Father.

"Perfect" occurs in the Old Testament and refers to ethical uprightness.

> *These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless (tawmeem-perfect) in his generation. Noah walked with God.*
> *Genesis 6:9*

> *When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless (tawmeem-perfect),*

that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.
Genesis 17:1-2

I was blameless (tawmeem-perfect) before him, and I kept myself from guilt. And the LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to my cleanness in his sight. With the merciful you show yourself to be merciful; with the blameless man you show yourself to be blameless; with the purified you deal purely, and with the crooked you make yourself seem righteous.
2 Samuel 22:24-27

The word can also carry the concept of *completeness.*

You shall count seven (tawmeem-complete) weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering.
Leviticus 23:15

And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jashar? The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a (tawmeem-complete) day.
Joshua 10:13

This call does not differ from that of the Old Testament.

Speak to all the congregation of Israel and say to them, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.
Leviticus 19:2

The perfection here is the fulfillment of the Mosaic law, but now according to its definitive interpretation by the Messiah who brings the Kingdom.

Love for God and one's neighbor and more to the point, love for one's enemies, will be described by Matthew as the commandments upon which all the law and the prophets depend.

On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.
Matthew 22:40

For Matthew, to be *perfect* means to fulfill the law through the manifestation of an unrestricted love which includes even the love for one's enemies. This to Matthew is the true reflection of God's love.

It is this kind of love that embodies ethical perfection.

It is this kind of love that Jesus calls his disciples to emulate and manifest.

The last piece of this passage comes with the fact that God is heavenly. He is transcendent. This way of referring to God as heavenly is unique to Matthew in the New Testament.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.
Matthew 6:14

Look at the birds of the air: they neither reap nor sow nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?
Matthew 6:26

For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.
Matthew 6:32

Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.
Matthew 15:13

These verses once again reflect Matthew's Jewish overtones, and the *heavenly Father* expression beautifully captures the divine transcendence of *"heavenly"* with all of the love and grace that come with the intimate term *"Father."*

The final, climactic antithesis turns to the great love commandment of the Old Testament. Jesus, interpreting the law in the light of the dawning of the kingdom, extends the application of that commandment so as to include even ones' enemies. The love he describes, of course, is not an emotion but volitional act for the benefits and well-being of others, even those we may dislike. In this love that knows no boundaries, the disciples are to reflect the generosity of God, who sends blessing upon both the righteous and the unrighteous and who has brought the kingdom to the unworthy. The righteousness of the kingdom can be satisfied with nothing less. And as the disciples live out this righteousness, they confirm their identity as children of the heavenly Father. This is an ethic that will startle those who experience it; it is an ethic that will inevitably shine like light in a dark place and cause the Father to be glorified. It should be added that the perfection in view here is a goal toward which disciples are called to strive, but not one they will fully achieve in this life. The call to perfection is quite like the Pauline call for Christians to be what they are in Christ. Here it is a matter of being children of the Father.
Hagner – Matthew, page 136