

Bible Studies for Life: Distinct in My Love

February 13, 2016

- *The Bible Studies for Life lesson for Feb. 28 focuses on Matthew 5:43-48.*

Bully. The mere mention of the word brings back an image. It's not an image of a stereotypical playground menace, but it's the face of a specific individual imprinted on the film of your memory. The image is of a person, and you know this person's name. You can recall it without thinking.

Being bullied is a ubiquitous childhood experience. Even the bullies can remember the names of those who bullied them!

In last week's lesson, Jesus addressed assaults upon a person's possessions and honor. With these final verses of Matthew 5, Jesus taught that the evil people who desire to cause harm to others should be the recipients of Christian love.

Love even those who hate you (Matthew 5:43-45).

Many people grew up in loving homes. Many others did not. They weren't shown how to love. They weren't given the example of what love says and does. Unfortunately, the absence of love brings a certain familiarity with hatred.

Recently, a teenage boy told me about his relationship with his mother. Their main mode of communication is yelling. He has also told me how his mother was raised by an alcoholic grandmother. It's been a long process to help him understand his mother's difficulty in loving him is in part based on his grandmother's failure to adequately love his mom. Of course, the lack of love doesn't excuse any behavior, but this young boy is beginning to see the

effects of an absence of love in his family. He understands he needs to obey his mom. He needs to love her.

Some people are so easy to love. They're a joy to be with. They light up a room when they enter it. These are the people Jesus didn't have to tell us to love, because we love them already.

Then there are those who are not like that. These are the people who are hard to love. They're obnoxious, irritating, condescending, irrational, easily angered, detached or just flat-out mean. These are the people Jesus had in mind with these verses.

Recently, I preached from 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter. More than a few people commented to me on how I stepped on their toes. I thought the sermon would have been an uplifting and encouraging message. Instead, we all learned that the challenge to love is just as daunting today in our society as it was in first century Corinth.

Love in a way that is a testimony to others (Matthew 5:46-47).

Do you remember the Amish school shooting in 2006? The country was moved with the Amish community's extension of forgiveness and reconciliation to the gunman and his family. The country was impressed, because it had not seen such forgiveness.

As followers of Jesus Christ, each one of us is called to that same radical forgiveness. This forgiveness should not be a surprise to our society, because every Christian should exhibit the gracious spirit of Jesus all the time.

In *The Unbelievable Gospel*, Jonathan K. Dodson notes faith allows believers to see what those who don't have faith cannot see. The result is that we as believers live differently. We know how unlovable each one of us is, and we also know God's love for us. That enables us to love. Each one of

us knows our fight isn't against flesh and blood. We know our enemy isn't other people. This knowledge should remind us to love others, especially our enemies.

Love like God loves (Matthew 5:48).

In order to love the way God loves, a Christian would have to be perfect. How can anyone be perfect the way God is perfect? I was taught that the word "perfect" carries the idea of "mature." When I switched the words in the verse I came up with: "Be mature, therefore, as your heavenly Father is mature." Some how describing God as "mature" doesn't seem to capture the essence of his holiness.

I think Eugene Peterson catches the intent of the verse in *The Message*. He translates this verse: "In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

I love that phrase, "Grow up." That's a maturity that I can understand. So many Christians need to take "grow up" to heart. They need to grow up and be mature. In this way, we will exhibit mature and Christ-like actions, attitudes, speech, emotions and thoughts. All Christians can mature in their walk with Jesus.

The beginning of John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world." This phrase means God loves everyone in the world—those who love him and those who hate him. I want to love everyone that way, but I'm not there yet.

When I hear about our service personnel losing their lives overseas in the line of duty, I'm saddened, but I don't cry. When I hear that the loss of life is from a nation allied with our cause, I'm somewhat relieved they are not from the United States. When I hear it's a member of a foreign nation's police force whom our troops are training overseas, I'm even less affected. When I hear that an ISIS fighter is killed, I wonder: Where is my love?

I still have some more growing to do. Lord, help me to love others the way you love me.