

John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospels*, 1555

Matthew 5:43, *Thou shalt love thy neighbor*. It is astonishing, that the Scribes fell into so great an absurdity, as to limit the word *neighbor* to benevolent persons: for nothing is more obvious or certain than that God, in speaking of our neighbors, includes the whole human race. Every man is devoted to himself; and whenever a regard to personal convenience occasions an interruption of acts of kindness, there is a departure from that mutual intercourse, which nature itself dictates. To keep up the exercise of brotherly love, God assures us, that all men are our brethren, because they are related to us by a common nature. Whenever I see a man, I must, of necessity, behold myself as in a mirror: for he is my *bone and my flesh*, (Genesis 29:14). Now, though the greater part of men break off, in most instances, from this holy society, yet their depravity does not violate the order of nature; for we ought to regard God as the author of the union. Hence we conclude, that the precept of the law, by which we are commanded to love our neighbor, is general. But the Scribes, judging of *neighborhood* from the disposition of the individual, affirmed that no man ought to be reckoned a *neighbor*, unless he were worthy of esteem on account of his own excellencies, or, at least, unless he acted the part of a friend. This is, no doubt, supported by the common opinion; and therefore the children of the world are not ashamed to acknowledge their resentments, when they have any reason to assign for them. But the charity, which God requires in his law, looks not at what a man has deserved, but extends itself to the unworthy, the wicked, and the ungrateful.

44. *Love your enemies*. This single point includes the whole of the former doctrine: for he who shall bring his mind to love those who hate him, will naturally refrain from all revenge, will patiently endure evils, will be much more prone to assist the wretched. Christ presents to us, in a summary view, the way and manner of fulfilling this precept, *Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*, (Matt. 22:39) For no man will ever come to obey this precept, till he shall have given up self-love, or rather denied himself, and till men, all of whom God has declared to be connected with him, shall be held by him in such estimation, that he shall even proceed to love those by whom he is regarded with hatred.

We learn from these words, how far believers ought to be removed from every kind of revenge: for they are not only forbidden to ask it from God, but are commanded to banish and efface it from their minds so completely, as to *bless their enemies*. In the meantime, they do not fail to commit their cause to God, till he take vengeance on the reprobate: for they desire, as far as lies in them, that the wicked should return to a sound mind, that they may not perish; and thus they endeavor to promote their salvation. And there is still this consolation, by which all their distresses are soothed. They entertain no doubt, that God will be the avenger of obstinate wickedness, so as to make it manifest, that those who are unjustly attacked are the objects of his care. It is very difficult, indeed, and altogether contrary to the disposition of the flesh, to render good for evil. But our vices and weakness ought not to be pleaded as an apology. We ought simply to inquire, what is demanded by the law of charity: for, if we rely on the heavenly power of the Spirit, we shall encounter successfully all that is opposed to it in our feelings. This is undoubtedly the reason why monks, and other bawlers of the same class, imagined that these were *advices*, and not precepts, given by Christ: for they took the strength of men as the standard, for ascertaining what they owe to God and to his law. And yet the monks were not ashamed to claim perfection for themselves.

45. *That ye may be the children of your Father who is in heaven.* When he expressly declares, that no man will be a child of God, unless he *loves those who hate him*, who shall dare to say, that we are not bound to observe this doctrine? The statement amounts to this, “Whoever shall wish to be accounted a Christian, let him *love his enemies*.” This was perceived, not only by heathen philosophers, but by some wicked despisers of godliness, who have made this open confession, that in nothing do men resemble God more than in doing good. In short, Christ assures us, that this will be a mark of our adoption, if we are *kind to the unthankful and evil*.

Luke says, *and you shall be the children of the Highest*. Not that any man acquires this honor for himself, or begins to be a *child of God*, when he *loves his enemies*; but because, when it is intended to excite us to do what is right, Scripture frequently employs this manner of speaking, and represents as a reward the free gifts of God. The reason is, he looks at the design of our calling, which is, that, in consequence of the likeness of God having been formed anew in us, we may live a devout and holy life.

He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. He quotes two instances of the divine kindness toward us, which are not only well known to us, but common to all: and this very participation excites us the more powerfully to act in a similar manner towards each other, though, by a *synecdoche*, he includes a vast number of other favors.

46. *Do not even the publicans the same?* In the same sense, Luke calls them *sinners*, that is, wicked and unprincipled men. Not that the office is condemned in itself; for the *publicans* were collectors of taxes, and as princes have a right to impose taxes, so it is lawful to levy them from the people. But they are so called, because men of this class are usually covetous and rapacious, nay, deceitful and cruel; and because among the Jews they were the agents of a wicked tyranny. If anyone shall conclude from the words of Christ, that *publicans* are the basest of all men, he will argue ill, for our Lord employs the ordinary phraseology. His meaning is: those who are nearly devoid of humanity have some appearance of discharging mutual duties, when they see it to be for their own advantage.

48. *You shall therefore be perfect.* This *perfection* does not mean *equality*, but relates solely to resemblance. However distant we are from the perfection of God, we are said to be *perfect, as he is perfect*, when we aim at the same object, which he presents to us in Himself. Should it be thought preferable, we may state it thus. There is no comparison here made between God and us: but the *perfection* of God means, *first*, that free and pure kindness, which is not induced by the expectation of gain; — and, *secondly*, that remarkable goodness, which contends with the malice and ingratitude of men. This appears more clearly from the words of Luke, *Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful*: for *mercy* is contrasted with a mercenary regard, which is founded on private advantage.

Inst. III.viii.6 In this way only we attain to what is not to say difficult but altogether against nature, to love those that hate us, render good for evil, and blessing for cursing, remembering that we are not to reflect on the wickedness of men, but look to the image of God in them, an image which, covering and obliterating their faults, should by its beauty and dignity allure us to love and embrace them.