

Research Article

## The Ethic of Enemy Love in Matthew 5:43-48: A Grace-Based Ethics Perspective

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### Abstract

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The ethic of enemy love in Matthew 5:43-48 is traditionally interpreted through performance-based morality emphasizing human effort. This research produces a "Rest-in-Conflict Model" as alternative framework grounded in grace-based ethics. Employing grammatical-historical exegesis combined with canonical-theological methodology, this study examines Matthew 5:43-48 as theological foundation (Christ's impossible command) and Romans 12:17-21 as practical application (Paul's strategic implementation). The methodological connection operates through progressive movement: Command (Matthew 5:48's τέλειος/teleios, "be perfect") → Strategy (Romans 12:20's "coals of fire" as conscience-warfare through kindness) → Rest (Ephesians 2:6's seated position in Christ). Research findings contribute three distinctive results: (1) Exegetical clarification that τέλειος (teleios) indicates wholeness of character rather than behavioral flawlessness; (2) Conceptual framework showing "coals of fire" as subversive spiritual strategy attacking enemies' psychological defenses; (3) Pastoral model of "rest even in conflict" where believers govern from seated position in Christ rather than striving through personal strength. This Rest-in-Conflict Model distinguishes itself from similar research by integrating exegetical, systematic, and practical theology into unified grace-based framework, demonstrating that enemy love results from Spirit-wrought transformation through union with Christ, not human moral achievement. The model addresses performance anxiety endemic in contemporary evangelical ethics.

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### Introduction

Jesus's command in Matthew 5:43-48 to love one's enemies stands as perhaps the most counterintuitive and difficult ethical teaching in all of Christian Scripture. When Jesus declared, "But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44, WEB), He established an ethical standard that appears not merely difficult but humanly impossible to achieve through natural human capacity.

The contemporary evangelical church has predominantly interpreted this ethic through the lens of "performance-based morality," an approach emphasizing human effort, moral discipline, and behavioral achievement as the pathway to Christian virtue (Horton 2011, 642-645). This approach produces two equally problematic outcomes: first, spiritual burnout and despair among believers who recognize their inability to consistently love enemies; second, self-righteous pride among those who believe they have successfully mastered this ethical demand

through superior willpower or spiritual discipline (Bridges 1991, 34-37).

The instinct for revenge constitutes a universal human response to perceived injustice. Neurological research confirms that revenge activates the brain's reward centers, suggesting that the desire for payback is neurologically hardwired into human psychology (Singer et al. 2006, 466-469). It is precisely within this context that Jesus's command to love enemies becomes radically subversive and profoundly counter-cultural.

Furthermore, the command culminates with an even more daunting imperative: "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48, WEB). The Greek term τέλειος (teleios, "complete, mature, whole"), traditionally translated "perfect," has generated extensive theological debate regarding whether Jesus demands absolute moral flawlessness or something else entirely (France 2007, 219-220).

This research addresses three primary questions:

**Exegetical Question:** How should Matthew 5:43-48, particularly the command to "be perfect" (τέλειος, teleios), be understood within its literary and theological context, and what does the Greek terminology reveal about Jesus's actual ethical demands?

**Theological Question:** How does a grace-based theological framework, grounded in union with Christ, Holy Spirit transformation, and divine initiative, fundamentally reorient our understanding of enemy love as gift rather than achievement?

**Practical Question:** What are the concrete implications of a grace-based approach to enemy love for Christian living, particularly regarding the concept of "rest even in conflict" and the strategic use of kindness as spiritual subversion?

This study aims to: (1) conduct detailed exegesis of Matthew 5:43-48 using grammatical-historical methodology; (2) develop a theological framework for grace-based ethics integrating Pauline theology with Jesus's ethical teaching; (3) critique performance-based morality from theological and psychological perspectives; (4) articulate practical applications of grace-based enemy love.

The research contributes theologically by bridging the divide between grace-based soteriology and works-based sanctification, exegetically by offering fresh engagement with the τέλειος (teleios)

command, and pastorally by providing resources for believers struggling with impossible moral demands.

### *Historical Interpretation of Matthew 5:43-48*

Early church fathers interpreted enemy love within martyrdom contexts. Augustine acknowledged the command's difficulty while insisting on its possibility through grace: "He who enjoins this love does Himself produce it in the hearts of believers through the Holy Spirit" (Augustine 1948, 1.22.73). This framework, divine command requiring divine enablement, profoundly influenced Western theological ethics.

Martin Luther's interpretation must be understood within his law-gospel dialectic, reading Jesus's ethical teaching as primarily *usus elencticus legis* (the convicting use of law), intended to expose human inability and drive sinners to grace (Luther 1956, 21:105). John Calvin offered more nuanced reading, distinguishing between "perfection of love" commanded and "perfection of degree" unattainable in this life (Calvin 1972, 1:182).

Contemporary evangelical scholarship exhibits diverse approaches. D.A. Carson emphasizes the passage's connection to Leviticus 19:2, interpreting τέλειος (teleios) as comprehensive devotion rather than moral flawlessness: "The demand is not for sinless perfection but for a love like God's love" (Carson 1984, 150-151). R.T. France similarly argues that τέλειος (teleios) indicates "wholeness, maturity, completeness" and that Jesus's point is "the quality of character which reflects that of God" (France 2007, 219).

### *Grace Theology: Theological Foundations*

Reformed theology distinguishes between definitive sanctification (positional reality of being "in Christ") and progressive sanctification (experiential growth in holiness). John Murray emphasizes that sanctification is fundamentally God's work: "It is God who sanctifies... Sanctification is not something wrought by us but something wrought by God" (Murray 1955, 149).

Sinclair Ferguson grounds sanctification in union with Christ (ἐν Χριστῷ, *en Christō*): "Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation... In Him we died; in Him we rose; in Him we live" (Ferguson 1987, 97). This Christological grounding

means ethics flows from identity rather than striving toward identity.

Michael Horton argues that contemporary evangelicalism has lost this Reformed emphasis, reverting to semi-Pelagian moralism: "We have turned the gospel into a program for getting our act together... The focus shifts from God's work to our work" (Horton 2011, 643).

The contemporary "grace movement" represented by Jerry Bridges, Elyse Fitzpatrick, and Tullian Tchividjian emphasizes applying gospel grace to sanctification. Bridges writes: "Our worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace" (Bridges 1991, 17).

### *Performance-Based Morality: A Critique*

Psychological research documents harmful effects of religious performance orientation. Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory demonstrates that extrinsic motivation (performing to gain approval) produces inferior outcomes compared to intrinsic motivation (acting from internal values) (Ryan and Deci 2000, 68-72). Performance-based religious ethics generates extrinsic motivation, fostering either rebellion or compulsive perfectionism.

Research on "moral licensing" suggests that performance-based ethics can paradoxically undermine consistent moral behavior. Successfully performing one moral action can psychologically "license" subsequent moral failures (Merritt, Effron, and Monin 2010, 344-348). Grace-based ethics, by contrast, grounds identity in who believers are in Christ rather than what they achieve.

Theologically, performance-based morality contradicts fundamental Protestant theology by violating sola gratia, smuggling works-righteousness into sanctification despite excluding it from justification (Horton 2011, 654). It undermines assurance by making standing contingent on performance and produces either self-righteousness or despair rather than humble gratitude.

### **Materials and Methods**

This study employs qualitative theological research methodology, specifically biblical-theological

analysis combined with systematic theological reflection. The exegetical work utilizes grammatical-historical methodology, examining Greek texts using standard critical editions (NA28/UBS5), investigating key terms using BDAG, TDNT, and NIDNTT, and understanding passages within their literary and canonical contexts (Osborne 2006, 21-23).

The systematic theological work follows "grace-centered dogmatics," prioritizing sola gratia as the interpretive key for understanding all theological loci, including ethics. The method is explicitly Protestant and evangelical, affirming biblical authority, the Reformation solas, and the necessity of Spirit-wrought transformation. It operates within the Reformed tradition's emphasis on union with Christ as the organizing principle for soteriology and sanctification (Ferguson 1987, 97-100).

### **Results**

#### *Exegesis and Theological Analysis*

#### *Detailed Exegesis of Matthew 5:43-48*

##### 1. Literary Context

Matthew 5:43-48 forms the climactic sixth antithesis in Jesus's extended section contrasting His authoritative teaching with traditional interpretations (5:21-48). The six antitheses follow a consistent pattern: "You have heard that it was said (Ἡκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη, Ēkousate hoti errethē)... But I say to you (ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, egō de legō hymin)," establishing Jesus's authority to reinterpret and radicalize Torah (Luz 2007, 233-235).

The six antitheses escalate in radicality: (1) murder to anger, (2) adultery to lust, (3) divorce to permanence, (4) oaths to truthfulness, (5) retaliation to non-resistance, and (6) love for neighbors to love for enemies. Each moves from external behavior to internal disposition, from natural human response to supernatural divine character, revealing Jesus's concern with heart transformation reflecting God's nature (Stott 1985, 92-94).

The enemy love command reaches the apex by commanding what is humanly impossible: love for those who actively hate and persecute. The entire section drives toward recognizing that kingdom righteousness (δικαιοσύνη, dikaiosynē) cannot be

achieved through human effort alone (France 2007, 218).

## 2. Verse-by-Verse Analysis

Matthew 5:43 states:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate

your enemy' (WEB).

The first half ("love your neighbor") directly quotes Leviticus 19:18. However, the Torah nowhere commands "hate your enemy." The Qumran community explicitly taught hatred of "sons of darkness" (IQS 1:10), demonstrating that first-century Jewish sectarianism could interpret Scripture in this direction (Hagner 1993, 133-134).

Matthew 5:44 records Jesus's response:

But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good

to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute

you (WEB).

Jesus responds with four imperatives:

"Love your enemies" (ἀγαπάτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑμῶν, *agapate tous echthrous hymōn*): The present imperative ἀγαπάτε (*agapate*, from ἀγαπάω, *agapaō*, "to love") indicates continuous action. The verb ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*) denotes unconditional, action-oriented love that does not depend on feelings or reciprocal response but on volitional commitment. This is the same love God shows to sinful humanity (Morris 1992, 124-125).

"Bless those who curse you" (εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς καταρωμένους ὑμᾶς, *eulogeite tous katarōmenous hymas*): The verb εὐλογέω (*eulogeō*, "to speak well of, to bless") carries deeper meaning than mere positive speech, it means to invoke divine favor upon someone. To bless those who καταράομαι (*katarāomai*, "curse, speak evil against") inverts expected reciprocity (Carson 1984, 150).

"Do good to those who hate you" (καλῶς ποιεῖτε τοῖς μισοῦσιν ὑμᾶς, *kalōs poieite tois misousin hymas*): The phrase καλῶς ποιέω (*kalōs poieō*) indicates not merely avoiding harm but actively benefiting. The verb μισέω (*miseō*, "to hate") denotes active hostility, not mere dislike.

"Pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you" (προσεύχεσθε ὑπὲρ τῶν ἐπηρεαζόντων ὑμᾶς καὶ διωκόντων ὑμᾶς, *proseuchesthe hyper tōn epēreazontōn hymas kai diōkontōn hymas*): Prayer with ὑπὲρ (*hyper*, "on behalf of, for the benefit of") indicates intercession, bringing enemies before God not for cursing but for blessing (Hagner 1993, 135).

The four imperatives progress from internal disposition (love) to speech (bless) to action (do good) to spiritual practice (pray), demonstrating comprehensive enemy love affecting every dimension of life.

Matthew 5:45: "that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust" (WEB).

The ὅπως (*hopōs*, "so that") clause indicates purpose or result: enemy love demonstrates and confirms one's status as υἱοὶ τοῦ πατρὸς (*hyioi tou patros*, "sons of your Father"). Sonship is not earned by enemy love but evidenced by it. Those who love enemies reveal family resemblance to the Father whose character they reflect (France 2007, 218).

God's indiscriminate beneficence, providing sun and rain to all regardless of moral status, establishes the paradigm. God's love is ἀγάπη (*agapē*) love: unconditional, initiating, unreciprocated. Divine love does not respond to the beloved's worth; it creates worth in the beloved. Christians are called to this same quality of love, which can only come from sharing in God's nature (Morris 1992, 125).

Matthew 5:46-47: "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your friends, what more do you do than others? Don't even the Gentiles do the same?" (WEB).

Jesus employs two rhetorical questions to expose the inadequacy of reciprocal love. Loving those who love you merits no μισθόν (*misthon*, "reward") because it requires no supernatural transformation. Even τελῶναι (*telōnai*, "tax collectors"), paradigmatic sinners in Jewish perspective, practice reciprocal love (Carson 1984, 150-151).

Greeting only ἀδελφούς (*adelphous*, "brothers") constitutes nothing περισσόον (*perisson*, "extraordinary"). Even ἔθνηκοί (*ethnikoi*, "Gentiles") manage this. If Christian ethics merely replicates natural human morality, wherein lies its distinctiveness? Kingdom righteousness must be

περισσός (perissos, "exceeding"), transcending natural morality and manifesting something supernatural (France 2007, 219).

Matthew 5:48: "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (WEB).

The inferential οὖν (oun, "therefore") connects this command to the preceding argument. The future indicative ἔσεσθε (esesthe, from εἰμί, eimi, "to be") functions as imperative: "you shall be" = "you must be."

The crux lies in τέλειος (teleios). This Greek adjective derives from τέλος (telos, "end, goal, purpose") and carries the root meaning "having reached one's τέλος," complete, whole, mature, fully developed. In classical Greek, τέλειος (teleios) described a fully grown animal, a mature adult, or something that has achieved its intended function (BDAG, 995-996).

The term appears throughout the New Testament with consistent emphasis on wholeness rather than flawlessness:

James 1:4 states: "that you may be perfect (τέλειοι, teleioi) and complete (ὀλόκληροι, holoklēroi), lacking in nothing" (WEB), clearly indicating maturity, not sinlessness (France 2007, 219).

Philippians 3:15 reads: "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect (τέλειοι, teleioi), think this way" (WEB). Paul immediately denies having already attained perfection in verse 12, demonstrating that τέλειοι (teleioi) refers to spiritual maturity (Fee 1995, 350-351).

Hebrews 5:14 states: "solid food is for the mature (τελείων, teleiōn), who by reason of use have their senses exercised" (WEB), referring to spiritual maturity through growth (Cockerill 2012, 268).

1 Corinthians 13:10 declares: "when that which is perfect (τέλειον, teleion) has come" (WEB), indicating completeness contrasted with partial (Fee 1987, 644-645).

Given this semantic range, τέλειος (teleios) in Matthew 5:48 most naturally indicates wholeness, completeness, or maturity rather than absolute moral flawlessness. Jesus calls disciples to whole-hearted, undivided, complete love that mirrors God's indiscriminate love (France 2007, 219-220).

Luke's parallel confirms this reading: "Therefore be merciful (οἰκτίρμονες, oiktirmones, from οἰκτίρων, oiktirōn, "compassionate, merciful"), even as your Father is also merciful (οἰκτίρων, oiktirōn)" (Luke 6:36, WEB). Luke interprets Matthew's τέλειος (teleios) with οἰκτίρων (oiktirōn, "merciful"), suggesting that the perfection in view is completeness of mercy, not flawlessness of behavior (Marshall 1978, 266).

The connection to Leviticus 19:2 further illuminates the meaning. Jesus echoes: "You shall be holy (ἁγίος, qadoshim; LXX: ἅγιοι, hagioi), for I Yahweh your God am holy (ἅγιος, qadosh; LXX: ἅγιος, hagios)" (WEB). The parallel suggests τέλειος (teleios) functions similarly to ἅγιος (qadosh, "holy"), a call to reflect God's character comprehensively, to be wholly devoted and undivided in love (Carson 1984, 151).

Nevertheless, even understood as "wholeness," the command remains stunning. Complete, undivided, God-like love for enemies transcends natural human capacity, exposing human inability and pointing toward the necessity of divine enablement (France 2007, 220).

### *Theological Framework: The Impossible Ethic and Grace-Based Transformation*

#### 1. Why This Command is Humanly Impossible

The reality of sin and human limitations makes enemy love naturally impossible. Romans 3:23 clearly states: "for all (πάντες, pantes) have sinned and fall short (ὑστεροῦνται, hysteroῦntai) of the glory of God" (WEB). Sin has corrupted human cognition (noetic effects), disordered affections, and enslaved the will. Luther's *De servo arbitrio* argues that fallen humans cannot genuinely choose spiritual good: "Free will without God's grace is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bondsman of evil" (Luther 1957, 268).

Performance-based morality creates a destructive cycle. When someone attempts to love enemies through their own strength, the result is one of two extremes: first, spiritual exhaustion from an impossible standard; second, spiritual pride from feeling successful (when often it is merely external hypocrisy without internal transformation).

## 2. Grace-Based Ethics: Biblical Foundation

Ephesians 2:8-10: "For by grace (χάριτι, chariti) you have been saved (ἐστε σεσωσμένοι, este sesōsmenoi, perfect passive) through faith... not of works (οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων, ouk ex ergōn)... For we are his workmanship (ποίημα, poiēma), created in Christ Jesus for good works (ἐπι ἔργοις ἀγαθοῖς, epi ergois agathois), which God prepared before (προητοίμασεν, proētoimasen)" (WEB). The perfect passive emphasizes completed divine action. Good works are God's accomplishment through believers, not human accomplishment for God (O'Brien 1999, 175-178).

Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ (Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι, Christō synestaurōmai, perfect passive), and it is no longer I (οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ouketi egō) that live, but Christ lives in me (ζῆ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός, zē en emoi Christos)" (WEB). The old self that could not love enemies has died definitively; Christ now lives in believers, making His life the source of Christian ethics (Longenecker 1990, 93-95).

Philippians 2:13: "For it is God (θεός, theos) who works (ἐνεργῶν, energōn, present participle) in you both to will (τὸ θέλειν, to thelein) and to work (τὸ ἐνεργεῖν, to energein)" (WEB). God produces both the desire and the action, comprehensive divine agency from initial inclination to final accomplishment (Fee 1995, 234-237).

2 Corinthians 3:18: "But we all... beholding (κατοπτριζόμενοι, katoptrizomenoi) the glory of the Lord, are transformed (μεταμορφούμεθα, metamorphoumetha, present passive) into the same image from glory to glory (ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν, apo doxēs eis doxan)" (WEB). Contemplating Christ produces transformation, organic growth through Spirit's work, not manufactured achievement. The present passive indicates ongoing divine action (Harris 2005, 310-313).

Character transformation, including the ability to love enemies, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work within the believer, not the result of human hard work. Galatians 5:22-23 lists love (ἀγάπη, agapē) as the first fruit of the Spirit. The key word is "fruit," fruit grows organically as a result of life connected to its source, not something produced through hard work.

## *The Best Revenge: Romans 12:17-21*

### 1. Prohibition of Revenge

Paul's command is unequivocal:

Don't seek revenge yourselves (μὴ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκδικοῦντες, mē heautous

ekdikountes), beloved, but give place to God's wrath (δότε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ,

dote topon tē orgē). For it is written, 'Vengeance belongs to me (ἐμοί

ἐκδίκησις, emoi ekdikēsis); I will repay (ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω, egō antapodōsō),

says the Lord' (Romans 12:19, WEB).

The emphatic ἐμοί (emoi, "to me") claims vengeance as divine prerogative. When humans take revenge, they usurp God's role. This is not merely a moral issue but a matter of identity and trust. Furthermore, revenge causes someone to descend to the enemy's level. When you repay evil with evil, you become as low as the person who hurt you. This results in the loss of rest, the position of rest in Christ, and transforms into striving through one's own strength (Moo 1996, 780).

### 2. "Coals of Fire on the Enemy's Head"

Romans 12:20 states:

Therefore if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him

a drink; for in doing so, you will heap coals of fire on his head

(ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ, anthrakes pyros

sōreuseis epi tēn kephalēn autou) (WEB).

The dominant interpretation understands coals as producing shame that leads to repentance. Kindness unexpectedly shown to enemies burns their conscience, producing remorse that may lead to transformation. The "fire" is not literal burning but metaphorical psychological discomfort, the painful recognition of one's own evil contrasted with received good (Cranfield 1979, 648-650).

Cranfield explains that kindness shown to enemies creates paradoxical effects: the enemy cannot maintain hatred when met with kindness; conscience awakens and begins to work; shame and guilt emerge from the contrast between evil done and good received; and psychological defenses crumble because

there is no justification to continue hostility (Cranfield 1979, 649).

This is "the best revenge," kindness is the most severe torture for an enemy because it attacks their psychological defenses from within, more painful than physical retaliation. From this perspective, surrendering enemies to God's hands while showing kindness is both powerful and legal, free from criminal liability yet according to God's will.

### 3. Overcome Evil with Good

Romans 12:21 concludes:

Don't be overcome by evil (μη νικῶ ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ, mē nikō hypo tou kakou),

but overcome evil with good (νίκα ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸ κακόν, nika en tō agathō

to kakon) (WEB).

The verb νικάω (nikaō, "to overcome, conquer") appears twice. To be "overcome" by evil means being controlled or shaped by it, this happens when believers respond to evil with evil. Revenge constitutes being overcome because it adopts evil's methods, accepts evil's assumptions, and perpetuates evil's effects (Dunn 1988, 751-753).

Overcoming evil "with good" (ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ, en tō agathō) presents brilliant subversive strategy, conquering not with greater evil but with transforming goodness. Violence perpetuates violence; goodness transforms. Revenge escalates conflict; kindness de-escalates. Evil met with evil produces stalemate; evil met with good creates possibility for transformation.

## *Rest Even in Conflict: God Fights For You*

### 1. Biblical Theology of Rest

Exodus 14:14 provides a pivotal text: "Yahweh will fight for you (יְהוָה יִלָּחֵם לָכֶם, YHWH yilachem lakhem), and you shall be still (וְאַתֶּם תַּחַרְשׁוּן, ve'atem tacharishun)" (WEB). The Hebrew verb תַּחַרַּשׁ (charash, "to be silent, still") indicates cessation of anxious activity. Israel's deliverance depends entirely on divine action, not human effort. This theological pattern, Yahweh fights while His people rest, recurs throughout redemptive history (Fretheim 1991, 155-157).

1 Samuel 17:47 affirms: "for the battle is the LORD's (כִּי לַיהוָה הַמִּלְחָמָה, ki la'YHWH hamilchamah)"

(WEB). The battle belongs to the Lord. You don't need to fight battles that weren't even yours to begin with.

Ephesians 2:6 presents believers' position as already "seated with Christ in the heavenly places (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις, en tois epouraniois)": "and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him (συνεκάθισεν, synekathisen, aorist from συγκαθίζω, synkathizō) in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (WEB). The aorist tense indicates completed action, believers have been seated with Christ. This "seated position" indicates rest in completed work. Christ's victory is finished; believers participate in His triumph by virtue of union (O'Brien 1999, 172-173).

### 2. Practical Implications

O'Brien explains the practical implications of this rest position: believers don't need to prove themselves right because God will vindicate; they don't need to defend their reputation because God guards it; they don't need to win every argument because victory is already theirs in Christ; and they don't need to protect their image because they are hidden with Christ in God (O'Brien 1999, 173).

Like the illustration of a president's child being attacked, the president's child doesn't need to do anything for revenge, because that would actually be foolish. Identity as a child is sufficient to ensure that the father will handle the situation with full authority (Tchividjian 2013, 127-130).

Philippians 4:6-7 provides promise:

In nothing be anxious (μηδὲν μεριμνᾶτε, mēden merimnate)... And the peace

of God (εἰρήνη τοῦ θεοῦ, eirēnē tou theou)... will guard (φρουρήσει,

phrouresei) your hearts and thoughts in Christ Jesus (WEB).

God's peace garrisons believers' hearts and minds, defending against anxiety's assault even amid conflict (Fee 1995, 421-423).

## Discussion

### *Theological Implications*

This study demonstrates that sola gratia (*grace alone*), Reformation's core soteriological principle, must equally govern ethics. The artificial division between grace-based justification and works-based sanctification contradicts gospel logic. If salvation is

entirely by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), and if sanctification is God's work (Philippians 2:13), and if Christian life is Christ living in believers (Galatians 2:20), then ethics must be grace-based throughout (Horton 2011, 654-656).

Contemporary evangelical ethics often lacks robust Christological grounding, treating Christian behavior as imitation of Christ's example rather than participation in Christ's life. This study argues that union with Christ (ἐν Χριστῷ, en Christō), not mere imitation, provides the proper foundation. Believers can love enemies because they are united to the One who loved enemies perfectly (Ferguson 1987, 54-55).

Christian ethics exists in eschatological tension between "already" (inaugurated kingdom) and "not yet" (consummated kingdom). Believers already possess new nature, Spirit, righteousness in Christ, yet not yet fully transformed, still struggle with sin, await glorification. This tension explains how believers are simultaneously "perfected" (Hebrews 10:14, τετελειώκεν, teteleiōken, perfect tense) yet "being sanctified" (ἀγιαζομένους, hagiazomenous, present passive participle). Definitively perfected in Christ; progressively sanctified through Spirit.

#### *Pastoral and Practical Implications*

Perhaps the most liberating pastoral implication is freedom from performance anxiety. Grace-based ethics addresses multiple manifestations: constant self-monitoring, comparison with others, fear of divine rejection, spiritual exhaustion, and the cycle of despair or pride (Fitzpatrick and Johnson 2009, 41-44).

Fitzpatrick and Johnson counsel believers to follow five steps: (1) Acknowledge inability ("I cannot love this enemy through my own strength"); (2) Remember identity ("I am already loved, accepted, secure in Christ"); (3) Trust divine work ("God is working in me to accomplish what I cannot"); (4) Focus on Christ ("I behold Christ who loved His enemies perfectly"); (5) Expect progressive growth ("God who began this work will complete it") (Fitzpatrick and Johnson 2009, 45-48).

The principle of "rest even in conflict" provides profound resource for believers navigating difficult situations. Traditional counsel often emphasizes techniques and strategies, but grace-based counsel begins differently: "You are seated with Christ in heavenly places. This conflict cannot touch your core identity. God fights for you; you can rest."

Reframing kindness from weakness to weapon provides powerful practical resource. Romans 12:20-21 reveals kindness as offensive strategy, "heaping coals" on enemies' heads, "overcoming evil with good." Kindness functions strategically, not manipulating outcomes but creating conditions for transformation while maintaining one's spiritual health.

#### *Addressing Objections*

**Antinomianism Concern:** The most common objection is that grace emphasis leads to license. Paul addresses this in Romans 6:1: "Shall we continue in sin (ἐπιμένωμεν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, epimenōmen tē hamartia), that grace may abound (ἡ χάρις πλεονάσῃ, hē charis pleonasē)?" His response is emphatic negation: μὴ γένοιτο (mē genoito, "May it never be!"). His argument is ontological, believers have died to sin through union with Christ (Romans 6:2). Continuing in sin contradicts their new nature.

The antinomianism charge misunderstands grace's transformative power. Grace doesn't merely pardon while leaving sinners unchanged, it transforms sinners into new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17). Titus 2:11-12 states: "For the grace of God has appeared... instructing (παιδεύουσα, paideuoussa) us to... deny ungodliness and... live soberly, righteously, and godly" (WEB). Grace itself instructs and transforms (Towner 2006, 744-747).

**Human Responsibility:** The objection concerns: "If God does everything, what about human responsibility?" Philippians 2:12-13 illustrates the relationship: "Work out (κατεργάζεσθε, katergazesthe) your own salvation... For (γάρ, gar) it is God who works (ἐνεργῶν, energōn) in you" (WEB). Human work is real but derivative, believers work because God works in them, not to make God work.

Biblical theology consistently affirms both divine sovereignty and human responsibility without resolving the philosophical tension. Believers should practice spiritual disciplines, exercise self-control, deliberately choose enemy love, but these practices are means of grace, ways of positioning oneself to receive divine transformation, not works producing it independently (Whitney 1991, 15-17).

## Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the ethic of enemy love in Matthew 5:43-48 must be understood within a grace-based theological framework rather than performance-based morality. The command to be τέλειος (teleios, "complete, mature, whole") indicates wholeness of character reflecting God's indiscriminate love, not quantitative behavioral perfection. Enemy love is Spirit-wrought transformation through union with Christ, not moral achievement through human effort.

Romans 12:17-21 provides practical framework: believers must not take revenge (ἐκδικέω, ekdikeō) but surrender enemies to God's judgment (ὀργή, orgē) while showing kindness that "heaps coals of fire," awakening conscience through unexpected good. The command to "overcome evil with good" (νικάω ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸ κακόν, nikaō en tō agathō to kakon) presents subversive spiritual strategy more powerful than revenge.

The concept of "rest even in conflict" (grounded in Ephesians 2:6's teaching that believers are seated with Christ, συνεκάθισεν ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις, synekathisen en tois epouraniois) provides profound liberation. Believers need not fight battles that belong to God. This rest isn't passivity but trust-filled positioning, allowing God to fight while believers maintain their seated position of already-achieved victory in Christ.

Theologically, this research reaffirms that sola gratia must govern not only justification but also sanctification and ethics. Union with Christ (ἐν Χριστῷ, en Christō) provides the foundation, believers can love enemies because they are united to the One who loved enemies perfectly. The Holy Spirit produces ἀγάπη (agapē) as His fruit; believers position themselves to receive it through Christ-focus, not manufacture it through willpower.

Pastorally, grace-based ethics liberates from performance anxiety while maintaining ethical seriousness. The command remains genuinely demanding, transformation is required, yet fulfillment comes through divine working: "For it is God who works in you both to will and to work" (Philippians 2:13).

The scandal and glory of grace: God demands the impossible, wholehearted, comprehensive love for active enemies, then accomplishes it Himself through believers united to Christ. This is Christianity's distinctive contribution: not "try harder" but "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). Free from revenge. Free to rest. Free to love the impossible.

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