

“Flavoring”

Matthew 5:38-48; The Six Antitheses ¹

What do you think about when you hear the word, “flavor”? For many of us, one of the first associations with “flavor” may have to do with the prefix, “thirty-one”—for Baskin-Robbins, of course!

Wandering around the Internet, I found a website called www.flavor.com, which listed dozens of flavors that can be purchased for foods of various sorts. Some of the flavor chemistry available includes almond, amaretto, anise, apple, apricot, banana, blueberry, butter, caramel, cherry, chocolate, coconut, and coffee . . . the list goes on and on.

Various kinds of flavorings are used to alter or to enhance the tastes of many of the foods we eat, and you probably know that our sense of smell is actually the primary determinant of a food’s flavor. According to Wikipedia, foods have only one of five tastes (sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and savory), but a food’s flavor can be changed almost without limits by changing its smell.²

We generally organize smells into two broad categories. We call smells we find unpleasant “odors,” while we call smells we find pleasant “fragrances” or “aromas.”

The word “flavor” appears in the Bible only once (Job 6:6), as does the word, “odor” (John 11:39). But “fragrance” appears fourteen times (e.g. John 12:3), and “aroma” appears forty-one times. Thirty-nine of those occurrences of “aroma” have to do with offerings made to the Lord by fire (e.g., Exodus 29:18), but the last time “aroma” appears in the Bible, it refers to those who follow Jesus: *“For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?”* (2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

In a way, this morning’s message is a continuation of last week’s consideration of how we are to be *“the salt of the earth”* (Matthew 5:13), which obviously has to do with flavoring, as well. The texts we read this morning are known as Jesus’ six “antitheses”—six statements by which Jesus turned the interpretation of six familiar religious teachings completely upside down.

In each of these antitheses, Jesus took what had been understood as a law governing external behavior and showed that God’s focus is really on the internal attitudes that *result* in that behavior. For example, you and I might be able to sit pretty comfortably with the Pharisees so long as the criterion of righteousness is whether or not we’ve literally murdered someone. But our comfort is short-lived, because Jesus said that *just being angry* with someone invokes the same guilt in God’s eyes. Which of us is righteous now?

Our focus this morning is on the last of these antitheses, with particular attention to the very last sentence: *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48). Let’s look at that sixth antithesis once again. You’ll find it in Matthew 5:43-48:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**”*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on April 3, 2011.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flavor>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aroma>

That last sentence is both familiar and frequently misunderstood. Jesus wasn't talking about being sinless. God is perfect, and we are not—nor will we ever be. The New Testament makes it very clear that you and I will never experience sinlessness until we cross over into eternity.

Jesus was talking about being perfect in love, and the New Testament repeatedly holds out the possibility that God's grace can accomplish that perfection in us if we do not shrink back from God's process of character formation. Our focus this morning has to do with the flavor, the aroma, the fragrance, that you and I add to the world when we make progress toward being made perfect in love.

Jesus said that loving our enemies is one of the requirements of becoming perfect in love. And such love doesn't have anything to do with feelings of warm regard—if we felt that way toward our enemies, well, then they wouldn't be enemies, would they? Loving enemies as Jesus commands us to love them means that we do our best to give them what we think they need, not what we think they deserve.

Jesus never intended that we should love those who hate us in the same way that we love our families. God's *agape* love is not a feeling. God's love is something we do. God's love is an act of the will. It's a choice. And because it's a choice, it can be commanded. The truth of the matter is that there is no more effective way to remove bitterness from our hearts and no more effective way to flavor and to transform the world, than to pray for the persons we're tempted to hate, and to go out of our way to be kind to them.

Jesus never promised that such behavior would turn enemies into friends. Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't, as His own crucifixion is stark witness. But Jesus did tell us that such self-giving is the only way to peace—if not for ourselves, then for those who come after us.

Jesus didn't die on the Cross because He was weak and couldn't avoid it. Jesus died on the Cross because He knew that the only way to defeat evil is to be so big, so strong, as to take away its power by absorbing it into ourselves. Jesus defeated Evil on the Cross by absorbing Hell into His own heart. You and I are not called to that task—we can be very grateful that it's already done!—but we are called to similar work.

Alexander DeJong observed that “It is very much easier to go about declaring that there should be no such thing as war between nations than it is to live a life in which we personally never allow any such thing as bitterness to invade our relationships with the people we live and work with every day.”³

So what does such a difficult teaching as this look like in real life? The best way to illustrate what this means is to tell you about how some real people have done it

It was 1938, and more than two hundred men had been herded together in a cramped Russian prison. One of these men was David Braun, and another was a Greek Orthodox priest.

The priest had been thrown into prison because of his faith, and his peaceful, radiant countenance made him stand out like a candle in the dark. It was probably because of this that he became the target of two sarcastic and blasphemous fellow-prisoners, who continually harassed and mistreated him. They mocked everything he believed in, but the priest was always kind in return.

One day David received a package of food from his wife, an absolute treasure to the starving men. David shared a piece of his food with the priest, who then broke it in two and gave

³ Alexander DeJong, *Leadership*, vol. 4, no. 1.

half to each of his two tormentors. “My friend,” David said in surprise, “you are very hungry. Why did you not eat the bread yourself?”

“Let me be, brother,” he answered. “They need it more than I. Soon I will go home to my Lord. Don’t be angry with me.” Soon after that, the priest died. But there was no more mockery after that day, and there was a new aroma in that prison, a fragrance of life rather than of death.⁴ *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

It was 1947, and Branch Rickey, General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and a devout Christian, had a black man named Jackie Robinson in his office. Rickey was inviting Robinson to become the first black player in major league baseball. “What do you think, Jackie? Do you have guts enough to play the game no matter what happens? They’ll shout insults at you. They’ll come into you spikes first. They’ll throw at your head.”

“They’ve been throwing at my head for a long time, Mr. Rickey.”

“Suppose I’m a player who collides with you at second base, and I get up and say, ‘You dirty black so-and-so!’ What do you do?”

“Mr. Rickey, do you want a ballplayer who’s afraid to fight back?”

“I want a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back. You’ve got to do the job with base hits, stolen bases, and fielding ground balls, Jackie, nothing else. So how about this: I go into you spikes first. You jab the ball in my ribs and the umpire calls me out. All I can see is your black face and I haul off and punch you in the cheek. What do you do?”

Robinson thought about the direction of the conversation and then responded, “Mr. Rickey, I’ve got two cheeks.”⁵

As you probably know, things were not easy for Jackie Robinson. Events unfolded much as Rickey had predicted. But Jackie Robinson became the Rookie of the Year in 1947, was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962, and his uniform number, 42, was retired from all major league teams in 1997. *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

It was 2007, and Ghassan Thomas was pastor of one of the few public churches in Baghdad. His church put up a sign on their building that said, “Jesus is the Light of the World,” but the sign was quickly defaced by bandits who left a note: “Jesus is not the light of the world. Allah is, and you have been warned.” The note was signed “The Islamic Shiite Party.”

In response, Pastor Thomas loaded a van with toys and medical supplies—both in critically short supply—and took them to the headquarters of the Islamic Shiite Party. After presenting the gifts to their leader, Pastor Thomas told him, “Christians have love for you, because our God is a God of love.” Pastor Thomas showed the note to the astounded sheikh, and he asked the sheikh if he might show him where the Bible says that Jesus is the Light of the world (John 8:12).

“This will not happen again,” the sheikh vowed. If anyone comes to kill you, it will be my neck first.” And the sheikh later attended Pastor Thomas’s ordination service at the church.⁶ *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

⁴ Cornelia Lehn, *Peace Be With You* (Faith and Life Press, 1980), p. 91.

⁵ *The Jackie Robinson Story* (United Artists, 1950), written by Lawrence Taylor and Arthur Mann, directed by Alfred E. Green; www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/bhm/bio/robinson_jhtm

⁶ Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 61-62.

It was 2008, and Julio Diaz, a thirty-one year-old social worker in the Bronx, got off the subway on his way home to face a teen-age mugger on the station platform. The youth pulled out a knife and demanded that Diaz give him his wallet. Diaz handed over his wallet and then, as the mugger ran away, he called after him, “If you’re going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm.”

The youth stopped in shock. Julio continued, “It’s clear that you need money, so keep the wallet and take the coat. And if you want, I’m on my way to dinner, and you can eat with me.” The fellow was too shocked to say “no.”

As the two ate dinner at Diaz’s favorite diner, the youth marveled at how the dishwashers and servers greeted Julio. He figured Diaz owned the place. When the youth asked if he did own it, Julio answered, “No, I don’t, but haven’t you been taught to be nice to people?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think people actually did that.”

When the bill came, Julio asked for his wallet back so he could pay for the meal. Then he gave the teen \$20 and asked for the knife, which the youth surrendered.⁷ “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*”

Well, so what? I doubt that any of us in this room have ever faced offenses such as these or have been called on to offer such mercy in the Name of Jesus. Still, time and time again, we humans do become insulted or take offense because someone doesn’t give us the place, the attention, the consideration, or something else that we consider “our due.” Time and time again, we humans—even those of us who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus—are tempted toward revenge for some offense, real or imagined.

The evidence of such retaliation is most often seen in rudeness, in a critical spirit, in ignoring people, in giving people “the cold shoulder,” in efforts at character assassination through tale bearing and gossip. But revenge is sweet only to our *unredeemed* nature. To the extent that we live in the Spirit, we know that revenge is actually a poison that damages us far more than it does the targets of our anger.

How easily we forget that we who are in Christ no longer belong to ourselves, for God has bought us with a high price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Indeed, if we live in the Spirit, we actually have no Self to be insulted, for as Paul said, “*I no longer live, but Christ lives in me*” (Galatians 2:20).

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that “Somewhere somebody must have some sense. Men must see that force begets force, hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness. And it is all a descending spiral, ultimately ending in destruction for all and everybody. Somebody must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and the chain of evil in the universe. And you do that by love.”⁸

Dietrich Bonhoeffer correctly noted that “True Christian community is found in the place where the person you like least to be with always is,”⁹ and Henri Nouwen reminded us that “The one you least want to live with is the one who reminds you of that part of yourself that is most wounded and most in need of healing.”¹⁰

⁷ *StoryCorps: Recording America*, “A Victim Treats His Mugger Right,” www.npr.org (March 28, 2008).

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Knock at Midnight: Inspirations from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran (Warner Books, 1998), p. 51.

⁹ Cited by David Augsburg in Arthur Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999), p. vi.

¹⁰ Boers, p. 120.

Do you remember what the word “aroma” almost always refers to in the Bible? Thirty-nine times out of forty-one, it refers to offerings made to God through fire. And Viktor Frankl, in reflecting on his years in German concentration camps, wrote that “What would give light must endure burning.”¹¹

In last week’s text, Jesus not only told us that “*You are the salt of the earth*” (flavoring), but also that “*You are the light of the world*” (Matthew 5:13-14). It’s no exaggeration to consider experiences such as these I’ve told just now, those encounters when you and I become the aroma of Christ to our enemies, as times of sacrificial “burning” that are indeed pleasing to our Lord. Sometimes God calls us to do what we least want to do, because that’s what’s necessary if we’re going to be the kind of flavoring that causes God’s Kingdom to come in Bristol as it is in heaven.

Just how powerful is the blood of Jesus? It’s powerful enough to heal the breach between an old priest and his tormentors. It’s powerful enough to heal the hatred shown toward Jackie Robinson. It’s powerful enough to cause an Islamic terrorist to attend a Christian pastor’s ordination. It’s powerful enough to make a mugger surrender his knife. And it’s powerful enough to make you reconciled with . . . well, you know who.¹²

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

¹¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 1946.

¹² Mark Buchanan, *Your God is Too Safe* (Multnomah, 2001), p. 47.

Jesus' Six Antitheses

- Reader One: *"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'*
- Reader Two:** ***"But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment."***
- Reader One: *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'*
- Reader Two:** ***"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."***
- Reader One: *"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'*
- Reader Two:** ***"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery."***
- Reader One: *"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.'*
- Reader Two:** ***"But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all . . . All you need to say is simply 'Yes,' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."***
- Reader One: *"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.'*
- Reader Two:** ***"But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. . . . If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles."***
- Reader One: *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'*
- Reader Two:** ***"But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."***
- Together:** The Word of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God!

Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33, 37-38, 39, 41, 43-44, 48