

Text: Matthew 5:45

Theme: He Takes Care of Everyone

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Is God bigger than the universe? Well, of course he is. He created it all. He's the reason that the planets, stars and galaxies exist. So we try to picture God as this vast being way out there where space ends and infinity begins. We try, but we can't really imagine that. We only know that it has to be that way.

Is God small enough to fit into your bedroom? Well, of course he is. As you turn out the light and say your silent prayers to him, he is there at your beside, listening to every word, including the words you don't know how to say. It's as if God were small enough to slip through the keyhole and wrap you in his fatherly arms to assure you that he is listening to and taking care of the requests that you are bringing to him.

How can this infinite and personal God, who is bigger than the universe, be at your bedside and at the same time at the bedside of others who are praying for you? There is no logical answer to the question, except that nothing is impossible for God. That does not satisfy our reason, but it satisfies our faith, for we believe in "God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth." We call him Father, not just to identify the first person of the Trinity, but to describe his personal relationship with us. But he also made the heavens and the earth, and everything in them, including those who deny his existence or worship false gods.

Yes, he is a father to them too, although they do not acknowledge it, although they deny it. He also provides for those who neither ask him nor thank him for his blessings. Jesus noted that fact in his sermon on the mount when he said that "he causes his sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

Everyone knows that the sun that warms the fields of the godly farmer does the same for the ungodly. Everyone knows that the rain waters not only crops of the believer, but also the crops of the unbeliever. And perhaps we conclude that this is only an accident of nature, that the sun and the rain can't help but serve the evil as well as the good.

But Jesus puts a different spin on it. He says that God intentionally pours his blessings on the evil as well as the good. He wouldn't have to do it that way, you know. We sometimes marvel how summer showers fall only on a few of the parched lawns and fields. Do we think that God couldn't direct the rain to fall only on the fields of good Christian farmers?

It has happened that way, particularly during the plagues that afflicted the land of Egypt during the time of Moses. Some of these plagues harmed the Israelites as well as

the Egyptians, but not all of them. The last and most terrible plague caused the death of every first-born child in Egypt, but not in the homes that were protected by the blood of the lamb. And the hail that ruined the crops of the Egyptians did not fall on the land of Goshen where the Israelites lived. There God caused the destructive rain to fall only on the fields of the evil ones.

But those are the exceptions which demonstrate that God does not have to give rain and sunshine to the evil as well as to the good. But in mercy he allows the forces of nature to bless the unrighteous as well as the righteous. And when disasters strike, God brings relief, not only to those who put their trust in him, but also to those who ignore and deny him.

But we should not think that Jesus is talking only about rain and sunshine here. These two blessings represent all of the good things that God generously bestows on both the good and the evil. The blessings represented by rain and sunshine are endless, including the beauty of verdant islands in an azure sea, the majesty of snow-covered mountains and awe-inspiring canyons, the fertile womb and the warmth of family, the succulent orange, the crisp apple, the pecan pie, blessings that we recognize, and we thank the God who gives them. But also blessings that a merciful God generously bestows upon those who thank him not.

There are also blessings that result from the moral guidance God has given in the conscience and the Ten Commandments. There are many who would never obey those commands for the sake of the one who gave them. And yet when those commands are obeyed, blessings abound, even when those commands are obeyed only for the sake of tradition or social conformity.

God does grant a long and good life to those who honor their father and mother, as so many Christian families have learned. But honor for father and mother also blesses the families of the heathen. Those who respect body and life, sex and marriage, property, truth and reputation, those who don't allow greed to disturb their contentment, regularly experience greater satisfaction in life.

Of course, such blessings do not extend beyond the grave. When the time of grace has ended, the unbelieving, the unrepentant, will receive the punishment that their sins deserve. But in the meantime God mercifully provides an ungrateful world with the rain and sunshine of moral guidance that allows families to flourish like crops in the field.

God's generosity to the heathen sometimes disturbs us. When we see how the unrighteous prosper, sometimes by means of crime and oppression, we say, "It's not fair! Why do the unrighteous enjoy life while the righteous suffer?" But those complaints arise only when we are too eager for the lesser blessings, when we value material riches over spiritual riches that come from knowing the love of a God who sacrificed his Son for our salvation. When we are blessed with the comfort, peace and joy that come through faith, we do not envy those who suffer less and enjoy more material things. Rather we marvel at the mercy of God who even blesses his enemies and we remember that we are

also sinners who don't deserve his blessings, least of all the blessings that result from the forgiveness that Jesus earned for us.

But what is the point of all of this? Why does Jesus remind us that God grants earthly blessing to the evil as well as the good? Let him answer the question:

“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 the sons 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 brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

Sometimes we get a perverse satisfaction when the unrighteous receive the due reward for their deeds, when those who become prosperous by exploiting sex and violence for entertainment meet a premature death through drug overdose, when people of power and prestige are found guilty of white-collar crimes and incarcerated because of them. But such perverse satisfaction only exposes our own sinful nature. Jesus is not only identifying God as the source of unrighteous prosperity. He is identifying the ultimate demand of God's holy law. “Be perfect!” Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect. Be perfect in your love for God, who loves you and forgives you. Be perfect in your love for your neighbor, even the neighbor who hates you and persecutes you. If you fail to live up to that standard of perfection, you are as guilty before God as the sinners whom you condemn

And that clearly demonstrates the fallacy of considering ourselves better than others, as if we were the good and they were the evil ones, as if we are the righteous and they are the unrighteous. That brings us back to the fundamental truth that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Only in our faulty human judgment are we more deserving than others. When God blesses the evil and the unrighteous, he is also including us, who deserve his goodness no more than the heathen do.

The difference lies, not in our behavior but in the grace of God who bestows righteousness upon us for Jesus' sake. Yes, we are righteous, not because we say our prayers and bring our offerings to church. We are righteous because God has declared us righteous for Jesus' sake, and with that he has opened our eyes of faith to see the burden of guilt lifted from our shoulders, to see an eternal future in heaven instead of hell. And with that he has also laid upon us the burden of forgiving those who have sinned against us.

When we fail to love our enemies, when we refuse to pray for those who persecute us, we are not only guilty of disobeying God's law. We are guilty of ingratitude that fails, even refuses, to recognize that we also are sinners who deserve nothing but punishment from our God. And God forgives us in spite of that. While we repent of our more obvious sins, our outbursts of anger, our gratification of lust, God is

also forgiving our failure to love our enemies and to pray for them.

Perhaps we protest that it is impossible to forgive the spouse who has betrayed our love, to forgive a father who has abused and abandoned us. And that is exactly correct. Such forgiveness is beyond our ability. But that does not release us from the demands of God's law, which Jesus plainly sets before us today.

And yet God forgives us in spite of that. "For all have been declared righteous by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." We confess that we have not, that we cannot, love and forgive our enemies. And yet we bask in the righteousness that Jesus has earned for us, and we calm our troubled conscience with the assurance that we are children of God, joint heirs with Christ, who will some day reign with him in heaven.

And we remember that God does not show favoritism. He did not choose a certain race or nationality when he sent his Son to pay for the sins of the world. Thanks to Jesus, all are declared righteous, including those who ignore and deny him.

In an absolute sense, when God sends rain and sunshine on the unrighteous, he is sending rain and sunshine upon sinners like us. But in the same sense the righteous include those who are God's enemies and ours. For all have been declared righteous for Jesus' sake. The only difference is that they do not believe what Jesus has done for them. They cannot receive what they do not believe. And they cannot believe what they have not heard.

There is another way that God sends rain and sunshine upon the good and the evil. He sends us with the rain and sunshine of the Gospel, so that God's enemies can repent and believe and be saved.

It is fairly certain that those who take the trouble to listen to these radio sermons have already been brought under the umbrella of God's forgiving grace. But perhaps there is someone who has tuned in by accident and has not yet switched to another station, someone who is listening with some interest to a message from the Master, a message of our sin and God's grace. And if there is someone like that out there, God is causing the rain and sunshine of his Word to warm and nourish that person's heart. As a matter of fact, Isaiah has compared God's Word to rain that makes fields grow and flourish.

The same thing happens when you support your church's mission with your offerings, when you share what you know about God's grace to someone who is still struggling with the illness of unbelief. Yes, God does send rain and sunshine on the unrighteous as well as the righteous. And we are privileged to be a part of that rain and sunshine, when we love our enemies and share the good news of salvation with them.

During the past weeks we have seen how God's rain and sunshine have brought life and beauty out of the dead fields of winter. May the Word which we have heard

today bring forth the fruit of repentance, faith and salvation.

Dear Father in heaven,

We thank you for the rain and sunshine which provides warmth and nourishment for all of your creatures, including the ungodly and the impenitent. Use us to share the rain and sunshine of your Word with our enemies and yours, that fruits of repentance and faith may grow and flourish, and that many more may come to see you as the source of all blessings, for this life and for the life to come. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.