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ACTIVE DEMONSTRATION OF ΑΓΑΠΗ (LOVE) IN NIGERIA'S FRACTURED LANDSCAPE: A STUDY OF MATTHEW 5:43-48

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ABSTRACT
This study focuses on the radical demonstration of love commanded by Jesus in Matthew 5:43-48 as a framework for believers' lifestyle within Nigeria's fractured ethno-political and religious settings. Today, Nigeria is overwhelmed by systemic ethno-religious conflicts, political divergence, and recurring violence, which have deeply affected national cohesion. These challenges often promote cycles of vengeance, leaving people continuously divided, making it difficult for Jesus' followers to live out the command to actively love without setting boundaries. The research employs an exegetical and contextual theological methodology to analyze Jesus' command to love all, even enemies. It examines how this teaching challenges the prevailing patterns of hostility in Nigeria that make people show love only to those within their circles. The study argues that by commanding his followers to love their enemies, Jesus calls them to show love that transcends mere emotion and expresses itself in concrete, sacrificial action that seeks the well-being of others – even enemies. The findings indicate that living out the command of Matthew 5:43-48 offers a viable insight that, being children of the heavenly Father, believers should not partake in negative values such as enmity, but they are to love as God loves all, including his enemies. By exemplifying this unconditional love, believers in Nigeria can bridge hostile divides and thus become the salt and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16). Finally, this paper posits that demonstrating love in such manner is not a passive surrender, but a deliberate act that defines believers as citizens of God's kingdom in Nigeria's fractured landscape.

Keywords: Demonstration, love, fractured, landscape, Nigeria, Matthew

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Introduction

Nigeria is a nation blessed with a people of rich and diverse cultural heritage. Onyima observes that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious country with more than two hundred and fifty (250) ethnic groups (274). This diversity is both source of strengths and challenges. As Chidume and Mohammed rightly observe that after the independence in 1960, cultural diversity becomes part of Nigerian national heritage. People from different ethnic groups learn to live together especially in the urban area. They further note that the coming of people from different ethnic and religious groups to live together "can best be described as an exercise in mutual tolerance for peaceful co-existence" (138). In spite of this, the differences also pose a challenge toward achieving unity of purpose. Yemi and Kenter observe that over the years there was tension as a result of violence in Nigeria. They further argue that "Nigerian's strength lies in its ability to harness the collective power of its diverse population toward common goals" (170). To harness this power, love must take a center stage in Christians' lives to guide their actions toward others.

Nigerians must understand that the nation could only thrive with shared love and unity of purpose. Aragbaye, John and Akande maintain that unity is a shared responsibility vested in all citizens. This understanding of unity in diversity kept the nation moving. Today, the nation is fractured along ethnic, religious and political divides. In many communities, people are characterized by suspicion of others who do not share their dialects, religion or political affiliations. Oftentimes people feel safe only among tribesmen and those who share the same faith or political affiliation with them. Love is commonly expressed only within these circles.

It is a natural tendency for one to demonstrate love to associates and to also support them. Yet, Jesus' call for radical demonstration of love in Matthew 5:43-48 interrupts the human tendency of loving only associates and presses a demand upon us to love without setting bounds. The command calls Jesus' followers not only to tolerate their enemies but to actively show love and to also pray for their persecutors. For Christians in Nigeria, this command is not an abstract theory, but a practical blueprint for living. While Christians are called to pray for the peace of the nation (1 Tim. 2:1-2), this command demands a Christ-like love, a radical love that crosses lines of conflict and breaks the cycle of revenge. It calls Christians to love the very people whom society tells us to fear as a result of differences in ethnicity, religion or political affiliation, because all are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Employing an exegetical and contextual theological method, this paper analyses Matthew 5:43-48 and appropriates its teaching to the Nigerian context.

Clarification of key terms

Active: This is an intentional act that is not controlled or influenced by either favorable or unfavorable circumstances. In the light of this work, the word describes a deliberate or total change in loving that goes beyond a passive disposition to practically meeting the needs of all, including those who persecute us.

Demonstration: This is a practical or concrete way of carrying out a task or doing something. Whenever the word is used here, it refers to the practical way of loving all humans – even enemies.

Love: There are four major Greek words that are translated "love" in English. These include: *storge*, which denotes familial affection; *eros, which refers to romantic or sensual love; philia, which denotes brotherly or friendly love; and agape*, which is unconditional, self-giving love. Whenever love is mentioned in this work, it refers to agape, that is, unconditional love.

Fractured: This means something that is broken, affected, or tampered with. In the light of this research, the word points to the broken relationships that exist among different ethnic, religious and political groups.

Landscape: The word has multiple meanings; however, the word here refers to the overall situation that influences the way love is often practiced in Nigeria.

Concept of ΑΓΑΠΗ (LOVE)

The word love is expressed by only one word in the English language, while in Greek, there are multiple words which are used to express different nuances of the concept of love. These words are: ἔρως (romantic or affectionate love), φιλία (brotherly love), στοργή (familial love), and ἀγάπη (unconditional love). For this reason, it would not be out of place to ask: when the word love is mentioned in the English Bible, which Greek word is being used? In the Septuagint, the noun ἀγάπη is not commonly used, however, its corresponding verb ἀγαπάω is often used to translate the Hebrew word אָהַב which describes the love of God to man (e.g. Deut. 4:37; 7:13; Isa. 43:4; Hos. 11:4; Jer. 31:3, etc.). The word is also used to describe the love of man to God (Ex. 20:6; Deut. 5:10; 6:5; 7:9; Josh. 22:5; Judg. 5:31; Neh. 1:5 etc.), and love of man to man (Gen. 37:3; Lev. 19:18) (Quell 21-23; Brown et al. 12-13). This means that the word in the Septuagint speaks of both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of love. This aligns with Jesus' summary of all the commandments of God in Matthew 22:37, 39 "…you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, …you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (ESV). Beetham observes that ἀγάπη (love) in the New Testament "is a central and all-encompassing concept of Christian faith (cf. John 3:16). 'God is love' (1 John 4:8), and therefore, 'we also ought to love one another' (4:11)" (11). Anything less falls short of Christian values, thus, Jesus in Matthew 5:43-48 commands Christians to love unconditionally, without setting boundaries.

Analysis of Matthew 5:43-48

Loving enemies (verses 43-44)

Matthew 5:43 opens with an aorist verb Ἠκούσατε. This word according to William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, is from ἀκούω, "to hear" (32). It is an aorist active indicative, second person plural, which is translated "you have heard", pointing to what had been the teaching in the past. This verb ushers in the clause ὅτι ἐρρέθη "that it was said". The phrases "you have heard" and "that it was said" introduce an appeal to a received tradition. As Lapide rightly puts it, they form a "dual preamble…which in rabbinic usage always serves to introduce a divine statement from Torah" (77). However, the text shows that there was a certain teaching concerning love that was predominantly held by the people and which was misleading. The teaching is stated in the remainder of verse 43 which illustrates that which the disciples "have heard, that it was said", Ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου καὶ μισήσεις τὸν ἐχθρόν σου (*You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy*). This statement combines a biblical command with a non-biblical addition.

Rather than rejecting the Mosaic Law, Jesus challenges interpretations that restrict its moral demands. As France rightly argues, "Jesus rejects this distinction in favor of an undiscriminating love" (128). Matthew 5:43-44 represents one of the most radical teachings of the kingdom. This section functions as a key for understanding Jesus' demand of higher righteousness. Jesus gives an authoritative pronouncement, which is marked by the formula ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ("But I say to you"). The Greek word λέγω which means "I say", is in present active indicative, and its primary derivative "is the noun λογος". The word points to what Jesus is communicating to his audience (Silva 128). Jesus' statement "but I say to you" signals not a rejection of Torah but its reorientation within the context of the kingdom. As Lapide persuasively notes rather than offering opposites to the commandments, Jesus presents "supertheses" that deepen, strengthen, and radicalize the biblical commands by leading us back to their original meaning and purpose (46). Here, Jesus confronts interpretive tradition that defines neighborliness from the disposition of an individual.

Calvin opines that the scribes see neighborliness from this disposition. He argues, "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" (265).

Jesus' command to love enemies in the text of this study is rooted in the Old Testament command to "love your neighbor" in Leviticus 19:18. But the addition "and hate your enemy" is not found in the Old Testament books. Hagner argues that the clause "hate your enemy" is not directly quoted from the Old Testament, but "is an inference that was commonly drawn, for example, from such passages as Ps. 139:21-22; 26:5; or Deut 7:2; 30:7. On the basis of such passages Qumranites explicitly taught hatred of those regarded as enemies (1QS 1:4, 10-11; 9:21-26)" (134). The Qumran community was encouraged to show love to the "sons of light" and to hate "the sons of darkness" especially (1QS 1:9-10). France affirms that, this attitude "appears strongly in the Qumran Manual (1QS1:3-4, 9-10; 19:21-22, "they may love all the sons of light …, and hate all the sons of darkness". …)"' (128). He further stresses that Jesus was not at the time attacking the Qumran but he was addressing an attitude among the people of his days which was similar to this Qumran teaching (128).

Perhaps, the religious leaders of the time narrowed the word "neighbor" to mean fellow Jews, friends or associates. As Gonjing rightly observes, though there is no place in the Old Testament that permits hatred to enemies, many Jews have interpreted the command to love neighbor "…as permitting hatred for non-Jewish, hence the popular saying of love your neighbor and hate your enemies in their oral law passages over generations" (156). Many Jews in Jesus' time understood their neighbor to mean their fellow Jews, and thus limited the obligation to love to their own people.

Jesus in verse 44 pushes forward an active love that replaces hatred and possible retaliation. He uses the verb ἀγαπᾶτε (from ἀγαπάω, "to love"), which denotes an active and unconditional goodwill. Jesus commands his followers to demonstrate the kind of love that is not triggered by emotional feelings, but pushes for a deliberate choice of behavior and actions toward all, even enemies. The fact that Jesus commands his followers to love their enemies makes it clear that they will be confronted with the reality of having enemies. However, they are expected to respond to enmity with love. As Don Fleming puts it, Jesus insists that his followers must show love to their enemies (416).

Christianity itself is a product of God's love to humanity as clearly seen from John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (ESV). Thus, love is central to the teachings of Christianity. As Pennington persuasively says, "Love is, as is well known, the great message and vision of Christianity." Jesus' command to love enemies "is the high point of God's demands upon his people" (201).[1] Jesus did not just command his followers to love their enemies, but he also commands that prayer should be offered for those who persecute them. Here, Jesus is not much concerned with the cause of the enmity and the persecution, but on the need for his followers to love the enemies and pray for their persecutors. As Christopher Owczarek observes, the text does not state the reasons for the enmity or persecution. For this reason, the main interest of the injunction does not rest on the reason for the enmity and persecution experienced by Jesus' followers; rather, it rests on the need for radical obedience to the commandment (64). He further

1 The demanding nature of Jesus' command to love enemies does not render it impracticable or unachievable. However, achieving it may require a forgiving spirit and reliance upon God's grace, believers' understanding of the mercy of God upon their lives and the need to extend the same mercy to others.

reiterates that "the concern of this injunction rotates totally around the behavior of his listeners toward their adversaries…" (64). This is a call for Jesus' followers to demonstrate love to their enemies in a practical manner.

The practical nature of this love is clearly seen in Jesus' use of the two Greek verbs ἀγαπᾶτε and προσεύχεσθε (Matt. 5:44). Both are present imperatives in the second person plural, indicating that the command is not a mere instruction which one may decide to either obey or not, but it is mandatory. In Luke 6:27-28, Jesus makes it clear how this love can be demonstrated: "…do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (ESV). Davies and Allison suggest that this ethic offered both comfort and challenge: comfort in trusting God's justice, and challenge in embracing costly obedience (557–559). Loving enemies thus functioned as a lived command that shaped the behavior of believers in Christ in living a life of a higher righteousness. Loving enemies and praying for persecutors is a better and more practical approach to hostility within the framework of surpassing righteousness demanded of the people who belong to the kingdom.

Divine pattern of love (verse 45)

To properly grasp Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, we must first look at the entire teaching through the lens of its theology. Jesus in verse 45 of Matthew 5, clearly states the theological foundation of this command. He does not merely give his followers a very difficult ethical demand; rather, he anchors it in God's own character: "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (ESV). As Schröter and Jacobi posit, "…the high demand to love even enemies is founded on the example of none other than God, who gives sunshine and rain even to the unrighteous and evil (Matt. 5:45; cf. Luke 6:35-36; 11:42)" (361). A call to act like God in loving is a higher standard of righteousness expected of the kingdom citizens.

As Mark L. Strauss rightly puts it, "as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, their standards must reflect the character of the heavenly Father" (299). Herman Bavinck buttresses that "such an imitation is possible because we who are his beloved children are his image (Eph. 5:1). We are to be imitators of God in the same way that children imitate their parents" (318). Lawrence O. Richards rightly points out the theological basis for loving enemies when he says that, "in relationship with people, the kingdom citizen is called on to be like the Father in heaven and to love even enemies" (543). Pennington also notes that God's fatherhood is a basic idea among Jesus' followers. Paul argues that Jesus' followers are adopted into the community of faith, thus they are made children of "God and heirs of the Father's kingdom (Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 4:4-7)" (97-98). Moreover, Jesus in Matthew 23:9 instructs his followers, "…call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven" (ESV). The fact that Jesus' followers have God as their heavenly Father gives them a clear and distinct identity that requires them to live a life that is quite different from the way others are living. This shows that they are living a life "better than the teachers of the law and Pharisees" (Matt. 5:20 ERV).

When Jesus gave this command, his disciples were familiar with farming activities, just like many people in Nigeria who are agrarian. The people understood the importance of the sun and the rain in agricultural production. Lack of sunshine and rain could threaten the livelihood and the survival of the people. This is because both the economic security of a nation and the people's daily bread depend on them. Jesus in this verse clearly shows the impartiality of God's loving nature, for he does not withhold his sun from the farm of the evil man, nor does he refuse to release his rain on the farm of the unrighteous. God's providence goes beyond boundaries; it is unconditional and unmerited. His love is blind to ethnic labels and religious or political affiliations.

Thus, the verse gives a clear reason for the demonstration of such love: "*so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven*" (v. 45a ESV). For "the Christians' example is found in God, who gives rain and food to those who love him and those who hate him. He makes no distinctions, and as Christians follow his example, their character will become increasingly like his…" (Fleming 416). When Jesus commands his followers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors, he is really calling them into a family likeness: a call to be like God in character.

It is evident in Matthew 5:45 that the love of God is not reactive; he does not love people because of their good behavior, rather, he loves because he is good. Jesus calls his followers to extend their love in like manner to the people who treat them badly, doing so mirrors the impartial love of God. Pennington says that, Jesus' followers "…must be like the heavenly Father, who in his own perfect righteousness loves and cares for all peoples, the righteous and the unrighteous (5:45)" (201). On his part, Thomas Hale opines that, "God did not love us according to our worth or according to our behavior. He loved us fully even though we were his enemies. In the same way, we also must love other men" (173). Our obedience to this radical command to love all, even enemies proves our spiritual lineage as children of God, because he is love (1 John 4:16).

Moving beyond setting boundaries in loving (verses 46-48)

It is easier for one to love those within his/her circle. There is nothing extraordinary about parents loving their children, or about love shared within families and among friends or associates. Jesus in Matthew 5:46-47 confronts his followers with serious rhetorical questions to press forward the need to love in the same way God shows love to humanity, without boundaries: "…if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? …if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (ESV). Hale observes that, "in these verses Jesus teaches that if we do not love our enemies, there will be no difference between us and worldly men. …we can be different only if we follow Jesus' teaching" (173). On their own part, Davies and Allison note that the call for Jesus' followers to demonstrate this kind of love that is more than the one seen demonstrated among the tax collector and Gentiles "illustrate the theme of the greater righteousness (5:20): the righteousness of the Christian is to be of a surpassing, extraordinary character" (557). Therefore, Jesus' followers need to grow over and above sharing love with only their associates and extend their love to people outside, even to the enemies. This is a push to love beyond human tendency which sets boundaries in loving – the love shown as a result of attachment, affiliation or circumstances. Jesus commands his followers to demonstrate love that goes beyond emotions to the orientation of the will, an instruction that he gave within the context of discipleship. This is what it means to be salt and light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16).

As Davenport puts it, "…in the new age disciples of Jesus are to practice active concern for the well-being of the opponent himself, herself or itself" (181). This demonstration of love binds all virtues of the kingdom of God together. Gonjing rightly argues that all the kingdom's values that Jesus taught his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount are love-oriented, and setting boundaries in loving is a negative value that is not of the kingdom (155). He further reiterates that the rhetorical questions that Jesus raised in these verses point to the fact that showing love to associates and hatred to opponents is a common attitude "for those who do not live the values in 5:3-12. For that is how pagans behave. Even pagans do show compassion to their own kind, thus if the righteous persons do same, there is no difference" (159).[2] In this context, Jesus requires that

2 Jesus expects his followers to live their lives beyond normal human tendency. It is a common tendency for those within the same ethnic, religious and political groups to show love among themselves. This demonstration of love falls short of the Kingdom's values. The command to love enemies is given within the context of the need for a

his followers must move beyond loving their associates, companions or family members to show love to all, even their enemies. This means that selective demonstration of love has no spiritual significance.

Even in secular societies and within corrupt systems, people show love to their own. For Jesus' followers in Nigeria's pluralistic context, loving without setting boundaries means refusing to let ethnic, religious or political divides dictate our loving character. In this text, Jesus is not calling for tolerance or quiet avoidance of those labeled as enemies, but he requires that his followers should courageously cross their circles to actively engage in showing genuine kindness to outsiders. By doing so, they become perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect in loving (5:48).[3] To be perfect as God is perfect means that he is the standard of living that his followers must emulate. Mere obedience to God's instruction outwardly without an effort inwardly to conform to his character cannot please him (Gonjing 161). God in his mercy provides for all, even his enemies; he makes no distinction. Therefore, Christians must follow his example to show that they are his sons. This is possible only through the grace of God, genuine forgiveness and a recognition of shared humanity.

Practical appropriation for the Nigerian Christians

One of the purposes of biblical exegesis is to appropriate the lessons learnt to contemporary life situations. The need for applying the lessons of an exegetical study can never be overemphasized. Andrew David Naselli posits that there is need to apply the Bible to lived experience "because God's Word is authoritative" (309). Loving enemies as commanded by Jesus in Matthew 5:43-48 is an unconditional and sacrificial kind of love that must be practiced by every follower of Jesus Christ. In other words, showing this kind of love is not an option for believers, but a necessity. This is because, "…to treat others with kindness and compassion is to image God and to reflect the activity of the heavenly Father, who surpasses everyone in good deeds" (Patrick 294-295).

To effectively appropriate this instruction in the Nigerian context, which is fractured by ethnic, religious and political divides, believers must be deliberate in ensuring that they apply the command of Matthew 5:43-48 to love without setting bounds in their daily lives. We must understand that loving in such manner is rooted in the character of God – our heavenly Father, whose providence covers both the good and the unrighteous alike (Matt. 5:45). We must go beyond emotional disposition in our demonstration of love for others, to a concrete action that touches all aspects of life for the well-being of all, even enemies. F. F. Bruce further buttresses this loving attitude when he posits that, "the love which both the law and the gospel speak about is a concrete and practical attitude" (72). Therefore, when believers sincerely show love not only to their associates but even to their enemies, they obey the law of God.

As believers in Nigeria's fractured society, we are called to radical demonstration of love and intercession for all, even our enemies (persecutors). We must intentionally shift from a passive attitude towards them, and from praying for their destruction to active demonstration of concrete love and praying for their good. For the text commands that we pray for our persecutors; that is, to pray for their salvation, change of heart and well-being. Christians in Nigeria must not engage in sharing tribalistic, religious or political insults, unverified security rumors or polarizing

surpassing righteousness that Jesus demands from his followers (Matthew 5:20). Therefore, showing love beyond boundaries is one of the distinct Kingdom values.

3 Jesus expects his followers to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect. This perfection (τέλειος, "complete, mature") is not a legalistic perfection, but maturity in love. They are to demonstrate love that is complete, all-inclusive, and boundless.

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narratives that dehumanize other people who are not within their circle – even their enemies. Furthermore, Jesus' followers must render a helping hand to those in need, including their enemies. They must resist the temptation to favor only people from their own circle, and to maintain absolute fairness, honesty, and integrity when engaging in business with those individuals from rival ethnic, religious and political circles.

Loving enemies means living a higher standard of righteousness that reflects the principles of God's kingdom and not of a fallen world. This way of life which negates worldly standard is offered by Christ to his followers. As rightly described by Brian Matz, "Jesus offered his followers an entirely different way to relate to the world around them" (41). This radical path that Jesus commands his followers to take, demands much sacrifice but is transformative. Matz further observes that Jesus' followers are required to make "sacrifices for the sake of an admittedly slower but perhaps surer and more thorough transformation of the world and its affairs" (41).

By living out this command to love enemies, Christians in Nigeria become the salt and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16), and fulfil the law of God as Jesus did. John W. Campbell observes that "when the Lord describes Christians as salt and light, he is expressing both their character and function" (21). Showcasing love as instructed by Jesus will lead others to glorify our *Father in heaven*. Therefore, believers' character must be different from that of the world. Jesus says that, it makes no difference, if one shows love to a close associate or greets people within one's circle (Matt. 5:46ff). Olufunmilayo Olorunleke posits that Christians are expected to live differently from others: "they are to influence the world for good. …The presence of Christians in the world must be like a light in the darkness" (306). Therefore, Christians in Nigeria must make their light shine in the midst of darkness by living out Jesus' command to love enemies and to keep praying for their persecutors.

Conclusion

This study examines Jesus' command to love enemies in Matthew 5:43-48, within the context of Nigeria's fractured landscape, characterized by ethnic, religious and political divides, marked by recurring ethno-religious and political conflicts. The contemporary Nigerian context demands a radical ethical value in the face of its persistent culture of retaliation. Through an exegetical analysis of Matthew 5:43-48, this research explores the theological basis of Jesus' command to "love your enemies". The Greek verb used for love in the text is ἀγαπάω, a sacrificial, unconditional love that mirrors the universal generosity of God, who provides his sunshine and rain to both the righteous and the unrighteous. By applying this biblical command to the Nigerian context, the research challenges the conventional boundaries of love prevalent among Nigerians. The findings suggest that practicing the command to love enemies requires radical obedience that is motivated by the love that God is bestowing upon humanity. The study concludes that the "surpassing righteousness" demanded in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:20, serves as a vital framework for living out this command. It ultimately positions the Nigerian Christians not merely as passive observers, but as active agents in dismantling human biases by living out God's kind of love that goes beyond boundaries in practice.

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