

Love Your Enemies

Luke 6:27-36

We live in a world that seems to be getting more and more polarized. People are more and more likely to assume extreme thoughts and behaviors from those who disagree with them, and refuse to cross any sort of divide. We see people not as potential allies, but instead as opponents who must be defeated. School board meetings, anti-government protests all are getting more and more divisive.

Yet there are stories of people reaching out to those they might consider enemies, and changes coming from that. In 2017, Hawk Newsome and a group of Black Lives Matter protestors from New York went to Washington DC to confront a group of Trump supporters. At first, the two sides shouted and traded insults at each other, and the situation looked like it would get out of control. But then Tommy Hodges, the organizer of the Trump rally, offered to give Hawk Newsome two minutes to address the crowds. He said a prayer, and talked about how they were anti bad-cop, and wanted to fix what was broken, and just wanted their God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. After the crowd applauded and he got off the stage, some of the Trump supporters came up and thanked him for coming. The experience changed all involved. Activists on both sides who wanted to keep up the anger, who wanted to build walls instead of bridges, were disappointed. But for some, taking a chance to love an enemy led to something greater. As Philip Yancey writes in his book *“What’s So Amazing About Grace?”* we should have one distinguishing mark as followers of Jesus. Not political correctness or moral superiority, but love.

G.K. Chesterton writes that we are commanded to love our neighbors and our enemies because

often they are the same people. It’s only those who we get close to who can really hurt us. Conflicts in our families, whether with parents, spouses, or children, are where we’re most vulnerable. Conflicts with our coworkers, bosses or employees, those we see every day, also hurt the most. Our neighbors sometimes make it hard to love them, too, when they don’t shovel their sidewalk or throw loud parties. And then there are the people we encounter in our everyday lives. Sometimes it comes from minor things like that guy who just cut you off as you were driving through town. Other times, maybe it’s something that makes us instantly stereotype someone, based on how they’re dressed or how they look. As wearing masks, for example, has become politicized, we can make instant judgments about someone we encounter just by seeing if they’re covering their nose and mouth. Am I supposed to love them too?

Jesus tells his disciples that yes; they are to love their enemies. In one of the most countercultural commands he gives, Jesus tells his disciples to love those who don’t love them, their enemies. It’s the culmination of the world turned upside down message he preaches. It’s what defines the followers of Jesus. Those words are followed by seven statements of what loving your enemies might look like. Doing good to those who hate you. Praying for those who mistreat you. Offering someone who strikes you on one cheek the other. Giving your shirt to the person who steals your coat. Giving to everyone who asks. Do to others, especially your enemies, what you would want done to you.

In saying “love your enemies,” Jesus is removing every limitation from love; love is no

longer inspired by its object, no longer dependent on the other's response to it. Love is instead based on what Jesus has done for us.

It's also important to remember that this is not just about feelings. It's about actions. "Love" in this passage is less a noun, a characteristic, an emotional state, than it is a verb. While it may be impossible to feel love for the enemy, it is not impossible to act in certain ways, even for those whom experience has shown to be the most entrenched of opponents. What Jesus means by the love of enemies becomes clear in the three verbal demands that follow and clarify the initial demand: "Do good," "bless," "pray."

Even those commands are impossible for us to keep. We have trouble enough loving those around us, those we choose to be around, those we actually like. How could we love those who hate us, those who persecute us, those who wish us harm? We can't. But God can. And God did.

As Paul wrote to the Romans, "For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." When we were sinners, when we were the enemies of God, Jesus loved us so much that he laid his life down for us, died for us on the cross. He loved us so much that he died for us, of his own free choice as the ultimate act of love. Even though we're often unlovable, even though we often reject his love, God loves us anyway. God loves us so much that God chose to love us, to send Jesus to die for us.

Jesus loved even those who persecuted him, even praying from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He overcame evil with good. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we're forgiven even when we conform to the world and hate our

enemies. But Jesus calls us to follow him in living a different way.

All of this is demanded by virtue of God's own graciousness and mercy. Christians behave lovingly to their enemies not as a ploy to outmaneuver them, not even because they anticipate a reward (although we hope and pray for some sort of positive change or outcome), but finally because God is a God of mercy. God is kind even to the undeserving, and that kindness must be found also in the lives of God's children. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, "Love is the only force capable of turning an enemy into a friend."

Loving our enemies isn't something that comes naturally. In fact, it's against our nature. Yet because of God's supernatural love for us, we can look with love on those who we would hate.

One of the most horrific tragedies of the last few years was the racially motivated shooting of nine African Americans in a church in Charleston, South Carolina. During the sentencing of the shooter, family members of the victim were understandably filled with anger and hate. Yet some offered him love and forgiveness. The niece of one of the victims said "I have many choice words I would love to say to you, but God is working on me so I will not." The son of another victim said "I forgive you. I know that you don't understand that, but God requires me to forgive you. I forgive you."

In 2006 a school shooter murdered some Amish children in a bloody massacre. The parents of the slain children had every right to be angry and bitter. They had every right to hate the shooter and his parents. But instead they loved their enemies. *The very next day* they went to the shooter's house and forgave his family.

The loving power of the almighty God is given to you through Jesus. When sin made you an enemy of God, Jesus loved you enough to die for you. You have been chosen in love to love. It is God's own love that seeks its way through you to your neighbor. Through you God reaches out in love. Through you God reveals his loving heart and through you the power of holy love flows. Thank God for choosing you to be in the loving fellowship of those who have heard the commandment to love. Thank God for giving you the power to love.

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