

How to Love our Enemies

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[0 : 00] had been talking about enemies. He said, how many of you have forgiven your enemies? And about 80% of the people raised their hands.

Then the minister repeated the question, and all responded this time except for one small elderly lady. Miss Joyce, are you not willing to forgive your enemies?

Oh, I don't have any, she said, smiling. Okay, how, Miss Joyce, that's very unusual. How old are you, 98? Yes, 98 years old.

Oh, Miss Joyce, would you please tell us how in the world a person could live 98 years and not have an enemy? She got up from the back pew, shuffled down the aisle, turned around and faced the congregation and says, I just outlived all the jerks.

Well, that's one way to do it. Let's understand the social context of Jesus' day and how in the world he could say this and be so radically different and unusual than what was required or what was asked of or what people had done.

[1 : 14] Leviticus 19, verse 34, God says, be kind to your enemy. Exodus 23, verses 4 and 5 says, help your enemy.

Deuteronomy 10, 19 says, love the sojourners through your land. Normally they were your enemies. In fact, you were supposed to show them hospitality. It was like as long as they were going through the land and not causing any problems, not part of a warfare group, it was like they were having a white flag.

They were given permission to pass through the territory. Psalm 24, 17 says, don't even rejoice when your enemy falls. Psalm 139, 21 and 22 says, however you are to hate those who hate God.

So there were statements in the Old Testament that made it very clear on how they were to see and perceive enemies. The scribes and Pharisees had a saying, Pharisees' favorite saying was, you shall love your neighbor but hate your enemy.

Made it very clear. They were the teachers of the day. But to be clear, who was an enemy? Well, an enemy was anybody who was non-Jewish. An enemy was anyone who declared that the God of Israel was not the true God.

[2 : 35] Such a person was considered a fool. An enemy was someone who was looked upon as a dog. Or a tax collector. Someone who was unclean.

But here Jesus proposes and he makes a statement. And by the way, this section is a section on what it is like to live in his kingdom. He has come as the king, and that's the whole theme of Matthew.

But this is the way to live. This is how you follow the king in his kingdom. This is the culture, the behavior, the lifestyle. This is the society of the king.

He says, love your neighbor and hate your enemy? No. No. Love your enemy too. And that's rather radical.

Now, I don't know about you, but I think it's radical today. Hey, I've got enemies and I don't want to love them. You know, I have a very hard time loving those who have done things that they've demonstrated that they were enemies.

[3 : 43] But he talks about our neighbor. He talks about the enemy. And he talks about love. And to be clear, an enemy was someone of the same, I mean, a neighbor was someone of the same family, a tribe or village or community.

So, people in your town, they were your neighbors. People who were related to you, they were your neighbors. People of your tribe, they were considered your neighbors. They were Jewish only.

But Jesus defines a neighbor as anyone who is in need. An enemy was an adversary, a foe, a rival, someone who was unfriendly, a hostile opponent, someone who stood against you for your demise.

A friend is one who seeks your good. An enemy is one who seeks your demise. Someone who has ill or evil desires and goals for you.

They might even go so far as plot against you. An enemy is someone who wishes to do you harm. It could be anyone, actually. As they define that, do you have anybody in mind?

[4 : 50] Or have you outlived the jerks? Someone who wishes to do your harm. It could be anyone. But he tells us to love.

And the word, of course, as you know, is the Greek agape. It's a more common term. Barclay says in his commentary, it means invincible goodwill.

It is an act of benevolence. It's not a matter of emotional affection. It's not the oxytocin that rises within us, the level of hormone that gives us the feeling of love.

But rather, it is an activity. It's something that we do. It desires and seeks another person's highest good and best. And this is what he calls us to do, is to love our enemies.

He's not saying like your enemies. He's not saying that you must be friends with your enemies in the sense of becoming close. If that happens, that's great.

[5 : 55] You know, that would be a wonderful goal. That would be an awesome thing, you know, to reconcile with your enemy to such a degree that you are able to become good friends with them. But that's a rare occurrence.

He's not calling on us to have this kind of phileo, friendship, love. But what is at the core of Jesus' command? Well, first of all, he says to be like God.

He says that you would be the sons of your father. It's not that we would earn a relationship with God or earn a way into heaven with God or earn God's pleasure and delight in such a way that we get brownie points and, you know, that we have credibility before God if we love our enemies.

This is a Hebrew way of saying, so you might be God-like. You know, chip off the old block. Be like your father.

Your father who loves his enemies. Verse 48, he says you are to be whole or complete or perfect. The word there, perfect, doesn't mean flawless.

[7 : 04] It means complete. You know, if you're building a house and you finally got it done, and, you know, that's complete. It's whole. It's perfect. It's not flawless.

It's not without problems or challenges or difficulties. You know, it's done. So how do natural sinful humans respond, though?

The worst Jewish sinner is mentioned here as a tax collector. It says he even loves those who love him. You know, they were the scum of the earth.

They were traitors in the minds of the Jewish people at the time because they were in sync with their enemies, the Romans. But the worst of the human sinners, the Gentiles, show a kind regard when they greet, Matthew 5, verse 47.

When they greet, they offer a shalom, which means may you be blessed with prosperity and peace and goodness and happiness and success. So what's his point?

[8 : 06] It's when it comes to others, especially your enemies, don't live naturally. Do something beyond what even the, what the Gentiles do or what the tax collectors do.

Don't live in the same stratosphere as the natural person on the same moral, spiritual level as your enemies. If you do that, you're just no better than anyone else. You see, what he's saying is to live in my kingdom under my rule as a king, this is a, the life that I am talking about is a topsy-turvy world.

It's actually very, very impossible to do. And yet he calls his followers to do that. It's not easy to be a follower of Jesus. In fact, you can find out that as you read through all the requirements that Jesus has, even in the book of Matthew, it's almost impossible to follow after him.

No wonder he did have thousands upon thousands of people following when he was on earth preaching the way a lot of others did. So how does God think and act?

How is it that the Father can do this, that we are to be like him in this way? How gracious God loves the world. He sees sin and he sees wickedness and evil, and yet he's concerned and he's caring and he's good, good enough to bring the sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and even on the unjust.

[9 : 44] He's kind that way. In fact, we know, as John 3.16 says, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. He gave his son for his enemies.

Paul picks up on this in Romans chapter 5. He brings out the very important point that Jesus, the God who became man, came on behalf of his enemies.

He came because of God, the Father. He came to do the will of the Father. So in Romans 5, we read verses 6 and following, he says, when we were still without strength in due time, Christ died for the ungodly.

Who are the ungodly? They were the enemies of God. They were not godlike. For scarcely a righteous man will one die, yet perhaps for a good man someone might dare to die, but God demonstrates.

He shows his own love toward us and that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While we were sinners. Sinners means we have crossed the line.

[11 : 00] We stepped over. Jesus, God says, don't do this and we do it. God says, you have to measure up this level to be able to come to me and we fail at that.

Sinners are trespassers. Trespassers. Sinners are those who have committed crimes against the Father. Sinners are those who betray God. And yet, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Much more than having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from the wrath through him. For if we were his enemies, when we were his enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son.

much more having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

You see, back in Matthew 5, it was an impossible task for anybody to really understand or wrap their eyes and minds and hearts around to get what Jesus was saying.

[12 : 08] that in order to follow him in the way that he was to be followed, you must love your enemies. I don't know about you, but if I were hearing that and listening, I'd say, well, this is, there's no way I'm going to do that.

Probably turn and go the other way. But what they didn't know at this time, but would know years later, is that Jesus himself is fulfilling this very passage that he would love his enemies for the greater good.

He would love his enemies on behalf of the Father. He would love his enemies as the true Son of the Father. And those of us who have been gripped by Christ's great news, this wonderful news, this is called the Gospel News, are able to love our enemies because of the gratitude that we have for Jesus and because of the empowerment that the Spirit has given us.

This is a message for us and this is something that we live and we live out because of what Jesus has done. So what's at the core of Jesus' command?

Well, first of all, is to be like God, God-like, Son of the Father. The second thing is to love. And as I said, this is not sentimental love.

[13 : 37] The motive is not so much to change your enemy's behavior or even to win them over, so to speak, though we do find in Romans 12 and other places where it's a wonderful thing if we heap the burning coals on their heads, so to speak, that they would come to faith in Christ.

it's not to make them a better people or even for you to be better. You know, if I'm nice to them, they'll be nice to me.

If I love them, they'll be my friend. I don't know about you, but that just doesn't work. If someone is set against you and they're going to be your enemy, they're going to be your enemy.

No matter how kind, how sweet, how wonderful, how good you are towards them, they will be your enemy. Now, some with a conscience might say, okay, I better quit this.

But a lot of people just don't. And so much of our thinking and action is driven by how others think about us. But that's not what he calls us to.

[14 : 41] He calls us to love our enemies and the reason is because God himself has loved us through his son. And that gets to the heart of Jesus and his kingdom message.

This is the good news is that we can live in Christ and live within the context of his environment, his society, his culture in a way that's radically different than anybody else.

We can love our enemies. And we know love is the real basis for relationship. It is the fundamental basis for our Christ-like thinking and our response towards people.

We love others because Christ has loved us. John brings that out in 1 John. We love because God loved us first. It's also exceptional thinking and behavior.

You know, what others do is expected. This is not expected. This is very exceptional. And so he highlights, you know, Gentiles do it this way and tax collectors do it that way but you go beyond that if you will follow me.

[15 : 49] See, the lesson of God's grace is that our loving treatment towards others is not based upon what they do. It's based upon what God has done for us.

We're not governed by what others do to us. Being in Christ, we're in a different kingdom. So how your enemies treat you should not surprise you. It shouldn't be a curiosity.

It shouldn't even be a bizarre behavior. Your life in Christ cannot be explained in natural terms or common terms. So we understand the context and we understand what Jesus is telling us.

Now, let's get down to how do we do this. it's not some ethereal thing, you know, where we think, I just, I want to ooze, mush all over somebody.

There's a very practical way that we do. We live out the love of God in us, the love of Christ in us. The first way Jesus explains what it means to love our enemies, Matthew 5, verse 48, he says, it's a command and a promise.

[16 : 58] Therefore, you shall be perfect or complete just as your Father in heaven is complete. We are to be complete and we will be complete in the Father.

So the first way is we must be in the Father. And the way to be in the Father is to be in the Father through Jesus. To know him, to believe in him, to trust in him and to receive his good work for us on our behalf.

The second way is to love like Jesus, to pray for them who persecute you. To pray for them. Sometimes that's even difficult.

Quite frankly, if I, you know, some of my enemies, I don't want to pray anything except that maybe God would get, you know, bring fire down on them. I get Peter when he says, you know, shall we rain fire down?

Let's call the Father, you know. Call him up and tell him to bring the fire down. but we are to pray for them which is what Jesus did on the cross.

[18 : 07] Father, forgive them. It's what Stephen did when he was being stoned in Acts. He prayed for them. The third thing is to bless and not curse.

Romans 12, verse 14. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and curse not. And what that means is, you know, to put a blessing on somebody is to desire their best and not to curse them.

That is, to put a curse on them so that the worst might happen. You don't speak cruelly back to them.

You speak kindly in return. Now, that's not to say that you ignore what they say or if you're confronting them, you know, you just give them sweet ideas and sweet thoughts.

Sometimes being kind means speaking truthfully. Telling them what jerks they are. Telling them they need to stop. Cease and desist. The kind of behaviors they have.

[19 : 16] Telling them, you know, they need to come to faith in Christ. Bless and not curse, which means to do good.

Luke 6, 27. I say to you who hear, love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. And to do good means to show benevolent kindness in return for cruelty.

1 Thessalonians 5, 15 says, See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. comes to mind the various things that, you know, I thought about enemies who sought to do me ill.

Enemies in the church as a pastor, I still went and visited them in the hospital. I had to resist the temptation to pray that God would take them.

But to pray with them when I knew in their heart of hearts they hated my guts. It's not easy.

[20 : 34] It's what he calls us to do. But he gives the empowerment to do that. To do that which is good. To do good, to not give evil for evil.

Romans 12, 17. Never pay back evil for evil. No revenge. We don't want to rob God of the opportunity to bring justice the way that he best can because sometimes we mess things up.

I may have given this illustration but years and years ago when my wife and I lived in Louisiana and we had a pastor who went to a guy who was apparently abusing his wife and the pastor confronted him and told him he needed to stop.

He needed to begin attending church to repent because he was a professing Christian but he had a shop in town. It was a mechanic shop and the guy was becoming just nastier and nastier and nastier not only to his wife and family but also to the pastor.

And the pastor warned him and said you know you keep this up. God just might bring justice about. He laughed at that. He said yeah what can God do?

[21 : 57] What is interesting about that is I don't know if it was a few days later or the next day or when it happened but we had a storm in town and it was the first tornado to hit that town in many many many years.

And where did it hit? The one and only place it landed on top of his auto mechanic shop and totally obliterated the place wiped him out.

God knew how to do it better than his wife or the pastor could. That's not to say that God does it all the time.

You know it's by his mercy thank God he doesn't do that to each one of us when we were enemies. Right? But he tells us here he says whoever compels you to go one mile go with him two give give to him who asks and from him who wants to borrow you from you do not turn away verses 41 and 42 and then he tells us to love your enemies.

Is that impossible? Yeah. But not in Christ we can do so because of Christ to live in Christ love your enemies.

[23 : 20] Our father we know that this is absolutely impossible this is topsy turvy this is different this is unique this is so radically unlike what the world has to say and what the world tells us to do.

Father we pray that you would give us hearts that would be softened towards others and that we would trust in you to do that which is right.

We know that you do not desire us to be passive in our lives but help us to be truth seekers and to be forward and to be honest and to confront people who are enemies and yet to still have that determination and desire to do what's in their best interest which ultimately is to come to faith in Christ and to know you and turn about from their wicked ways and to turn to you.

Father for the enemies in our lives whether they be family or people we know or neighbors associates may they see the life of Christ in us might that convict them might they hear the truth from our lips and may we be a good witness in such a way that we bring your word and your life to them but Father also give us the opportunity not only to love them as we ought to do good and not seek revenge but Father to trust in you to do what is right and to bring about what is just for those who have done us wrong thank you Father for your love for us when we were yet enemies you loved us in Christ amen to

Thank you.