

# Love Enemies

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[ 0 : 00 ] As we continue making our way through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we encounter for the first time the word that sums up its whole message, the word love.

And we encounter it in a surprising context, face-to-face with those who want to hurt us, face-to-face with those who want to snuff out our life.

When Jesus Christ gets a hold of us, when the kingdom of God draws near to us, when heaven begins invading earth, love starts emerging in very surprising places.

I tell you, love your enemies. Our text is Matthew chapter 5, verses 43 through 48. If you are able, will you please stand for the reading of the word of God?

Jesus is speaking. You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

[ 1 : 17 ] In order that you may be the sons and daughters of your father who is in heaven. For he causes his son to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers and sisters only, what do you have more than others?

Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect. Spirit of the living God, we believe that long ago now, you inspired Matthew the tax collector to write these words down on the page.

And I pray in your mercy and grace, that you would cause these words to come off the page now, and come alive in our minds and hearts and wills and spirits as never before.

For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. You may be seated. Before grappling with Jesus' command in this text, we need to ask the question, who or what is Jesus referring to when he says, you have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy?

[ 2 : 38 ] What authority said, hate your enemy? Not the Old Testament. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find the phrase, love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

Jesus is here addressing a misunderstanding of God's revealed will held by the scribes and Pharisees of that day. It's a misunderstanding due to a tendency every human being has.

The tendency is to accommodate God's revealed will to the so-called real world. The tendency to fiddle and modify and make God's will fit the so-called real world.

My friend John Piper puts it this way. Very often, our misunderstanding of God's word is not due to innocent intellectual slips or lack of information, but rather to a deep unwillingness to submit to the demands of God.

Nowhere does the Old Testament teach, hate your enemy. Indeed, not only is hate your enemy not in the Old Testament, there are clear indications that God's will goes in exactly the opposite direction.

[ 3 : 54 ] For example, Exodus chapter 23, verses 4 through 5. If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wanders away, you shall surely return it to him.

If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it there. You shall surely release it for him. Or take Job 31, verses 29 to 30.

As part of his protest of innocence, Job says, Have I rejoiced at the extinction of my enemy? Have I exalted when evil befell him?

No, I have not allowed my mouth to sin by asking for his life in a curse. Or take Proverbs 24, 29, the passage which the Apostle Paul records in Romans 12.

If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If your enemy is thirsty, give him a drink. More importantly, there is the fact that in the Old Testament, this word neighbor is not an exclusive word.

[ 4 : 57 ] The Greek word means what is nigh or standing near. The Hebrew word means comrade or companion. Thus, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber says that in the Old Testament, this word neighbor refers to the person with whom I have to deal at this moment.

Neighbor is the one who is encountering me right now, the one who is my concern in this instant, no matter whether a blood relative or a total stranger. In his sixth, you have heard it said, but I say unto you, Jesus is making explicit what is implicit in the earlier revelation of God's will.

Namely, that all along, neighbor would have to include the enemy. All along, love extended to the neighbor who likes us is to be extended to the neighbor who hates us.

I tell you, love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Love your enemy. Really? Do you really mean to use this word love, Jesus?

And if you do, are you serious? I mean, you're exaggerating, right, to make some other kind of point? Love, enemies, you are asking us to do the impossible, Lord.

[ 6 : 19 ] To which I think the Lord of life says, yes, I am serious, and no, it is not impossible. For one thing, my word is a creative word.

My word not only informs, it performs. My word has the power to bring into being what I command. In the beginning, I said, let there be light, and there was. Outside the grave of my good friend Lazarus, I said, Lazarus, come forth, and he did.

And now I say to you, love your enemies, and you will. And for another thing, I only command you to do what I think you are able to do.

You see, Jesus does not say, like your enemies. He doesn't tell us to like them. Jesus does not say, feel good feelings for those who abuse you.

He doesn't say, fall in love with people who want to hurt you. What helps me understand this command is to take more seriously the actual verb used in this text.

[ 7 : 26 ] As many of you know, the Greek language has at least four verbs, which we translate with just one English word, love. It's not unfortunate. I wish we had more words for love in our language.

The Greek language has at least four. There is the word storge. Storge is the love of family. Jesus does not say, storge, your enemy. There's the word eros.

Eros is the love of beauty. It's the love which is intoxicated with the object of its admiration. It's the love that is ignited by the beloved. Jesus does not say, eros, your enemy. There's the word philia. Philia is the word of mutual respect. It's the love that two friends have for each other, because they've come to trust each other, and they respect each other's character and abilities. It's the love for the good.

And it comes into the English language in words like philosophy, love of wisdom, and philanthropy, love of humanity. Jesus does not say philia, your enemies. The word used here is agape.

[ 8 : 27 ] And agape is the love which is born of decision. Agape is not ignited by the loveliness of the beloved.

Agape is energized by a decision of the will. William Barclay puts it this way. Agape does not mean a feeling of the heart, which we cannot help, and which comes unbidden and unsought.

Agape means a determination of the mind, whereby we achieve this unquenchable goodwill, even to those who hurt and injure us. Agape is the will to will, the goodwill of another, even when the other does not deserve it or will not receive it.

Agape is the love with which God loves us. Now, here's the point. You cannot command storge. Either you're a member of the family or you're not. You cannot command eros.

Either you feel good vibrations or you don't. You cannot command philia. Either you respect the person or you don't. But you can command agape. And that is what Jesus does.

[ 9 : 39 ] Agape your enemies. Choose to respond to your enemy's hatred by willing your enemy's goodwill. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses two practical questions raised by this radical command.

The two questions are, why and how? Why are we to agape love our enemies? And how, Lord? Why and how?

Before hearing Jesus' answers to those questions, though, we need to realize that he is not only serious about this verb love, he is also serious about the word enemy.

Jesus does not call us to deal with the people who have hurt us by calling them by some other politically correct term, as though to change their name will mute the problem.

He does not say to us, look, just stop thinking of the enemy as an enemy and you'll feel better. Think of the enemy as a victim. Call him a victim and you'll feel better.

[10:44] Perhaps this person is just the victim of his or her past who is helplessly trying to work out their rage on you. You'll feel better. Now, such advice does help.

It does help to know where someone is coming from. But such advice will not bring about this radical behavior to which he calls us, for the person will still be experienced by us as an enemy. Jesus calls them enemy. Which is to say then, that we will not come to love the enemy until we own the fact that they are an enemy.

Or at least that we perceive them to be an enemy. Which is to say, that we will not come to obey Jesus' command to love our enemies until we first face the fact that we hate them.

We will not love our enemies until we acknowledge that they feel like enemies to us and that deep down inside we hate them for what they are doing.

[11:42] We will not love until we face the fact that we hate. Am I right? And such hate is right.

Right? Yes. For after all, God hates. God hates what the enemy does. God hates the hurtful, evil words and deeds.

The living God does not just fold his hands and spout pious platitudes in the face of wrongdoing. And for us to do so, we're to insult his holiness and justice.

We ought to be very angry. We ought to feel great rage, as God does when someone is raped or when a drunk driver causes an accident or when drug dealers sell their poison to children at school or when people sneak around behind us to sabotage our reputation.

We ought to feel very angry. We ought to feel great rage at what the Serbs are doing in our time.

Right? Right? We are not alive unless we respond to evil with something akin to hate.

[12:56] We are not alive with the passion that God has for shalom, for wholeness, unless in some sense we hate those who seek to destroy that wholeness. We are not ready to love the enemy until we first acknowledge that we hate him or her.

Those who wrote the Psalms understood this. And that's why they pray the way they do. They know God's will.

They know God's call to this higher way. Yet they don't want to fake it. They know that before they can love, they first have to be honest that they hate.

Psalms 119, verses 7 to 10. When he who has spoken of evil of me is tried, let him come forth guilty. May his days be few. May another seize his goods. May his children be fatherless.

May his wife be a widow. May his children wander about and beg. Psalm 10, verse 15. Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer. Psalm 58, verse 6.

[13:58] Oh God, break the teeth in their mouths. They pray that way because that is what they felt about their enemies. And that's the way you and I feel about our enemies.

Am I right? Don't leave me alone here. Am I right? And we cannot get to the place where we can obey Jesus' radical command to love the enemy until we first acknowledge that we hate them.

Eugene Peterson in his book on the Psalms helps me here. He says, It's easy to be honest with God with our hallelujahs. It's somewhat more difficult to be honest with God in our hurts.

It's nearly impossible to be honest with God in our dark emotions of hate. But, says Peterson, we must follow the psalmist and we need to learn to be so honest.

We must pray who we actually are, not who we think we should be, says Peterson. Listen, in prayer all is not sweetness in light. The way of prayer is not to cover over unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable.

[15:08] In the way of prayer, we are to expose those unlovely emotions so that we can enlist them in the work of the kingdom. There's a young man in our neighborhood who is trying to control the neighborhood by terrorizing young kids.

He now has control over Montrose Park because he can come up to young kids and demand money of them. And if they don't give money, he makes them bow down before him.

And if they won't do that, then he will pull a knife on them. I confronted him last Friday night at the Little League game. It's been a long time that I've been that frightened by such evil.

Do I not hate him? Especially since now he is threatening to pull a knife on my older son. Do I not hate him? Take a moment now, will you?

And acknowledge who you hate. Bring to mind that person for whom you have even a modicum of hate. Acknowledge it.

[ 16 : 33 ] And even under your breath, express it. But I say to you, love your enemies.

Not like them. Not feel gushy over them. Not feel good about them. Agape them. Agape them. Why and how?

Why? For three reasons. First, to keep on hating those who hate us only makes the vicious cycle keep going. Hate for hate only multiplies hate.

Violence for violence only multiplies violence. Hardness for hardness only multiplies hardness. And slowly but surely, as Martin Luther King Jr. told us, we descend into a spiral of destruction.

Only light can break the spell of darkness. Only agape love can stop the chain reaction of this hate. Second, to keep on hating those who hate us rots our soul.

[ 17 : 42 ] Hate changes the hater. You saw it taking place right in front of your eyes in me this morning. Hate changes us. Changes the hater.

It distorts our personality. It distorts our perception of life. Hate hurts the victim, but more so it hurts the hater. Psychiatrists tell us that either we learn to love or we will perish in our bitterness.

Hate divides the essential self. Love unites it. Armando Variartes understood this. Armando

Variartes is the Cuban who suffered horrendous atrocities for 21 years in Castro's prison system.

Yet he made it through all of that hell with his essential self intact. And he has shared his journey in a book entitled Against All Hope. You just need to read the book. Against All Hope.

Armando Variartes. Page after page of inhumane demonic treatment and yet page after page of incredible ability to endure.

[ 18 : 43 ] Variartes' secret that comes out in nearly every chapter he had one constant prayer and this was his prayer. God give me the faith and spiritual strength to bear up under these conditions without sickening with hate.

Give me the strength to bear up under these conditions without sickening with hate. Without sickening with hate could have been the subtitle of his book. Variartes felt that if he ever gave in to the hate he felt for his oppressors he would die.

Who therefore needs our love more than those who hate us who are dying inside? Third, we are to choose love and not remain in hate because we want to be whole.

We want to be whole. We want to be like the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus says love in order that. Love in order that you might be. The Heavenly Father says Jesus causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good.

He sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. The love of the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ is indiscriminate and it is scandalous because God loves not only those who love him but God loves those who hate him and he showers both of them with the same resources.

[ 20 : 04 ] Dale Bruner put it this way, the communists and the capitalists, the rebels and the reactionaries, the reds and the rednecks, the whole lot get just as much sun and just as much rain as the devout and the dedicated, the Bible students and the evangelists, the prayers and the socially involved.

By this even-handedness God displays his maturity to the world and his will for his disciples. Wow. I will obey the command to agape my enemies to the degree that I understand and experience the Abba love of God. Love in order that you may be says Jesus.

I take that to mean love in order that you may truly be who you are, children of God. Like father, like son and daughter. The father loves indiscriminately and so do his children.

This is how we are to understand that really shocking line at the end of this text. You are to be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. What? The word translated perfect here is the word telias which means mature.

[ 21 : 10 ] You are to be mature in love as your heavenly father is mature in love. How? For goodness sakes, Lord, how? How are we to exercise such mature agape love towards our enemies?

In three ways. First, in simple deeds. Agape acts. Eros feels. Agape acts.

In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, do good to those who hate you. The apostle Paul expands on this when he quotes the proverb text we quoted earlier in Romans saying, if your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If your enemy is thirsty, give him something to drink. Pious utopian dreaming or the power to transform the heart of the enemy. A Presbyterian missionary who worked in Lebanon illustrates this for me.

John Makarian was for many years the president of a college in Beirut. When the violence began to escalate in Beirut a few years ago, most of the families in their huge apartment building evacuated. [ 22 : 14 ] John and his wife decided to stay. One day they heard the enemy's soldiers enter the apartment building and start destroying apartments one at a time. If anyone was found in any of those rooms, the soldiers would beat them.

As they continued their raid through the apartment building, John and his wife hurriedly made coffee and pulled some sweet cakes out of the cupboards. When the soldiers pounded on their door, John opened it and with a wide smile said, please come in and have some coffee and cake, you must be worn out from your work.

With astonishment on their faces, the soldiers came in, sat down, ate and drank and left the Makarians alone as long as they were in Beirut. I think of another story which I initially found very hard to believe.

A young teenage girl was raped and murdered. The girl's parents were to say the least devastated and outraged. The young man who killed the girl was caught, tried and sentenced to life imprisonment.

At first, the couple was consumed with bitterness, a fact for which none of us in this room would condemn them. But they soon realized that this was damaging them more than it was the person in prison.

[ 23 : 29 ] And they concluded that as Christians, the only way to wholeness was the way of forgiveness. And so they decided to go to the prison and tell this young man that they were choosing as an act of the will, as an act of faith to forgive him for his awful deed.

He was stunned. No one had ever spoken to him in anything like this. And he certainly didn't expect this from these people. But acting in love, choosing to forgive, slowly melted the couple's bitterness. They knew their Bible well. They knew this passage about feeding one's enemies. And so they decided that they would visit the prisoner on a regular basis, bringing him cookies and magazines and clothing. Their agape love for him slowly began to melt the man's hardened heart until one day he asked them, Why are you doing this?

And they answered, Because the Father loves you, and so must we. That night, the young man gave his life to Christ. He became a leader in the prison ministry.

One day the couple came to visit him again. They had discovered in the meantime that he had grown up an orphan and had never known parental love. And they had come to the prison to propose that they adopt him as their son.

[ 24 : 46 ] Agape your enemies with concrete acts of goodwill. Second, agape by word. Jesus says, Pray for those who persecute you and bless those who curse you.

Bless, bless. In the Jewish mind, to bless or to curse is to speak a word which in some mysterious way made things happen. That's why Jews do not give a blessing or a curse very lightly. Once a blessing or a curse is uttered, something is brought into being which now cannot be altered. Shalom Aleichem, peace to you, is more than a polite greeting.

It is a way of asking God to fill the other person with God's shalom, with God's wholeness, with God's peace. Bless your enemies. Say a word of blessing to them.

Speak a word of goodwill. May you know the mercy of God. May you be filled with the grace of God. May God not hold against you what you have done to me.

[ 25 : 49 ] Something happens, if not in the soul of the enemy, at least in my soul and in yours.

Bless and pray. Many people call Jesus' command to pray for the enemies the supreme command.

That's because there is no greater way to love than to pray. In prayer, we are bringing the other into the presence of the only one who can give the other life. It's like taking your enemy to the doctor, only in this case, this is the doctor who can redeem and recreate.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived under the reign of Adolf Hitler's rage, put it best. Through the medium of prayer, we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God.

Say that again. Through the medium of prayer, we go to our enemy, stand by him, and plead to God on his behalf. Jesus does not promise that when we bless our enemies and do good to them, they will not spitefully use and persecute us.

They certainly will. But not even that can hurt or overcome us so long as we pray for them. For if we pray for them, if we pray for them, we are taking their distress, their poverty, their guilt, their perdition upon ourselves, going into the presence of God and pleading to God for them.

[ 27 : 05 ] And then the line that gets me every time I read it, we are doing vicariously for them what they cannot do for themselves. As with every other command Jesus gives us, he is here only calling us to do what he himself does.

On the cross, he cries out, Father, forgive them. And millions of people have followed him in that love. Stephen, who was being, as he was being stoned to death, cries out, Father, forgive them. James, the brother of Jesus, as he was being executed, cries out, I beg you, Lord God, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

When we keep praying for that enemy, one day it dawns on us that he or she is no longer an enemy. For through the power of intercessory prayer at the foot of the cross, the enemy is transformed into a brother or sister in Christ.

Agape indeed, agape in word, and third, agape by giving into the agape love of God for you. We agape not by asking how the enemy treats us.

We will never get there if we ask how the enemy treats us. We agape by asking how Jesus' Father treats us. For were we not the enemies of the Father?

[ 28 : 38 ] Were we not the enemies of the Father? In fact, are not all human beings because of the power of sin the Father's enemies? Again, Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it so well.

The love for our enemies takes us along the way of the cross and into the fellowship with the crucified. In the face of the cross, the disciples realized that they too were his enemies and that he had overcome them by his love.

God asked nothing about our virtues, nothing about our vices, for in our sight even our virtues were ungodliness. God, God's love sought out his enemies who needed it. God loves his enemies.

That is the glory of his love. The living God not only causes the S-U-N sun to rise on the good and the evil, the living God causes the S-O-N sun, the sun of righteousness, to rise and reign on the good and the evil.

God loves his enemies enemies and dies for them. I know that the gospel is winning me when I will to will God's very best, even for that kid who wants to put a knife in my son.

[ 30 : 12 ] Love enemies. Held in the arms of the crucified Savior who dies for his enemies, what other choice do I have but to love him?

Why don't we do this? Bring to mind that person I had you bring to mind a little while ago, that person that you hate.

As an act of your will, I invite you to pray for that person. Come and take that person by the hand. Bring them up the mountain to Calvary. Stand at the foot of the cross and pray for that person.

And now I invite you, under your breath, to speak a blessing on that person.

[ 31 : 37 ] under your hand. With the girl, it's on very throat.

Thank you. Thank you. Alright. Thank you. Thank you.