

Love...Enemies...Really?

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[0 : 00] May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Amen. Amen. We are currently following Jesus into his now famous Sermon on the Mount. In the text we just read, many people consider that we have now reached the high watermark of the whole sermon. In this text, Jesus uses the word for which he is best known.

He uses the verb love. But he uses it in very surprising contexts. He uses the verb love face to face with the person who wants to hurt us in some way.

He uses the word love face to face with the person who does not like us. And who may want to get rid of us in some way.

[1 : 23] When Jesus gets hold of us individually or as a community, when he causes the kingdom of heaven to invade the earth, love starts happening in the least expected places.

You have heard it was said. You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies.

Love? Enemies? Really? Love? Love? Before wrestling with Jesus' seemingly impossible command, I think it's important to ask the question, to whom is Jesus referring when he says, you have heard it was said, you shall hate your enemies.

What authority told the people of God to hate their enemies? Not the Bible.

Not the Old Testament. Nowhere in Scripture do we find, love your neighbor and hate your enemies. Jesus is here addressing a misunderstanding of God's revealed will that was being thought of by many of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day.

[2 : 58] It's a misunderstanding due to a tendency in all of us. It's the tendency to accommodate the will of God to the so-called real world.

It's the tendency to make God's will more realistic. As John Piper observes, often our misunderstanding of God's will is not due to innocent intellectual slips or lack of information. Rather, it's due to a deep unwillingness to submit to the demands of God. Nowhere in the Old Testament does it say, hate your enemies.

Oh, yes. There are lots of places in the Old Testament where the people of God do hate their enemies. But nowhere does any authority say, hate your enemy.

Indeed, not only is hate your enemy not in the Old Testament, there are clear indications that the will of God goes in the opposite direction. Exodus 23, for example.

[4 : 10] If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering 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. Job 31. As part of Job's protest of innocence, Job states, Have I rejoiced at the extinction of my enemy or exalted when evil befell him?

No, I've not allowed my mouth to sin by asking for his life in a curse. And then in Proverbs 25, 21. 25, 21.

I printed the wrong number on the outline in front of you. Proverbs 25, 21. A text that Paul quotes in his letter to the Romans. If your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If your enemy is thirsty, give him something to drink. More significantly, the word neighbor, as in love your neighbor, was never intended to be an exclusive term.

[5 : 16] The Greek word for neighbor means that which is nigh, or that which is standing near, whether friend or foe. The Hebrew word for neighbor means comrade or companion, regardless of who the person is.

So, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber can say that in the Old Testament, neighbor means the person with whom I have to do at this moment, who is encountering me right now, the one who is my concern at this instant, no matter whether a blood relative or a total stranger.

You can see, therefore, that in this sixth, and culminating, you have heard it was said, but I say to you, Jesus is making explicit what was implicitly there all the way along.

All along, neighbor would have to include the enemy. All along, love extended to enemies who like us was to be extended to neighbors who, sorry, love extended to neighbors who like us was to be extended to neighbors who do not like us.

I say to you, love your enemies. Really? I mean, Jesus.

[6 : 37] Do you really need to put the word love and the word enemy in the same sentence? Like, you're just doing that for exaggeration, right?

Because you want to teach us something else. Love, enemies, Jesus, you're asking us to do the impossible.

To which, I think, Jesus responds, yes, I do mean to put love and enemies in the same sentence, and no, it is not impossible.

To which, we respond, like, Lord, I could use a little help here, not impossible. Why is your command not impossible? To which, I think, Jesus says, well, for one thing, my word is the 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 lots of it.

[7 : 43] Outside the grave of my good friend, I said, Lazarus, come forth, and he did, and now I say to you, love your enemies, and you will. And for another thing, Jesus says, I only command you to do what I think you can do.

You can do this. This is possible. You see, Jesus did not say, like your enemies.

Jesus did not say, feel good feelings for those who hurt you. Jesus did not say, fall in love with those who mistreat you.

What helps me understand this seemingly impossible command is to realize that Jesus has chosen his verb carefully. You might know that in the Greek language, the language of the New Testament, there are many verbs which we translate with the single English word, love.

For instance, there's the word, storge. Storge is the love of family. Jesus does not say, storge your enemy. There's the word, eros.

[8 : 58] Eros is the love of beauty. Eros is the love that is intoxicated with the object of its desire. Eros is the love that is swept off its feet by the beauty of the other.

Jesus does not say, eros your enemy. There's the word, philia. Philia, love, is the love of mutual respect. Philia is the love two friends have for each other because of the mutual respect for their character and abilities.

It's the love for the good. Thus we have in English words like, philanthropy, philosophos, love of humanity, and philosophy, philosophos, love of wisdom.

Jesus does not say, philia, your enemy. The word Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount is agape. And agape is love that is born out of decision.

Agape is the result of a choice. Agape is not ignited by the loveliness or goodness of the other. Agape is energized by an act of the will.

[10 : 05] Agape is decision love. Agape is the will to will the good will of the other. The will to will the good will of the other.

Whether or not the other deserves it. Agape is the love with which God loves us. Now, here's why I bothered with this little language lesson.

You cannot command storge. You're either a member of the family or you're not. You cannot command eros. You are either swept off your feet by the loveliness of the other or you're not.

You cannot command philia. You either have respect for the other or you do not. But you can command agape. Which is what Jesus does in the text.

I say to you agape your enemies. Choose as an act of your will to respond to your enemies hate by willing his or her goodwill.

[11 : 11] Now, what also helps me understand Jesus' seemingly impossible command is to realize that he uses this word enemy intentionally. He calls the person who wants to hurt us enemy.

He does not command us to deal with such people by calling them some politically correct other word that kind of mutes the tension. He does not say just stop thinking of the other as an enemy and you'll feel better about them.

He does not say just think of the other as a victim of her or his past who are helplessly working out their unresolved pain on you. Now, such advice does and can help.

It does help to understand where people are coming from. Sharon and I once attend a funeral for this woman who was mean to her family all of her life and everybody knew it and I was wondering what was going to happen and the first word out of the preacher's mouth was people in pain inflict pain.

That's helpful to know. But that's not enough to change behavior. Jesus calls the other who wants to hurt us enemy.

[12 : 26] Which is to say that we will not obey Jesus' command to love the enemy until we own the fact that they are an enemy or at least own the fact that they seem to be, that we perceive them to be an enemy.

Which is to say that we will not obey Jesus' command to love the enemy until we first own the fact that we hate them. We will not love our enemies until we acknowledge that they feel like enemies and that deep down we hate them for what they have done to us.

We will not love until we first face the fact that we do hate. And such hate is understandable and it's understandable to God.

For even God hates. God hates what the enemy has done. God hates the hurtful and evil word or deed.

The living God does not just stand by, folding his hands and spouting pious platitudes in the face of wrongdoing. And for us to do so insults God's holiness and justice.

[13 : 40] We ought to be very angry as God is when someone is raped or when a drunk driver causes an accident or when drug dealers sell their poison to children or when these people kidnap kids and make them soldiers or when people sneak around sabotaging our reputations.

We are not alive unless we initially respond with something akin to hate. We are certainly not alive with God's passion for shalom, for wholeness, for right relatedness unless in some sense we hate whatever destroys shalom.

We are not ready to love the enemy until we first admit that we hate. Now those who wrote the Psalms understood this.

And that's why they pray the way they do. The psalmists know the will of God. The psalmists know the call to a higher level and to a higher way.

Yet they do not fake it. Before they can love they know they have to be honest that they hate. We saw this last summer when we worked through the Psalms.

[14 : 53] Psalms like 109. When he who has spoken evil of me is tried let him come forth guilty. May his days be few. May another seize his goods. Psalm 10.

Break the arm of the wicked and the evil doer. Psalm 58. Oh God break the teeth in their mouths. The psalmists pray that way because that's the way they feel and that's the way we feel.

Right? And we will not be able to love the enemy until we face the fact that we hate the enemy.

I quoted from Eugene Peterson last summer from his book on the Psalms. He puts it this way. It is easy to be honest before God with our hallelujahs. It's somewhat more difficult to be honest with our hurts.

It is nearly impossible to be honest before God in the dark emotions of our hate. But, says Peterson, we have to follow the psalmist and learn to be that honest.

[15 : 56] We are not to pray who we think we are. We are to pray who we actually are. We are not to pray who we think we should be. We should pray who we actually are. Peterson says, the way of prayer is not to cover over unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but to expose them so they can be enlisted in the work of the kingdom.

them. Be still for just a moment and bring to your mind a person who has hurt you.

Tell the Lord what you feel about that person. Honest. I know, says Jesus.

I know. I know. I understand. But I say to you, love your enemies.

Not like them. Not feel good about them. Not gush over them. But agape them. Will to will their good will.

[17 : 24] Two questions. Why and how? Why should we do this, Lord? Three reasons. First, to break the cycle of hate.

To keep on hating those who have hurt us just makes the vicious cycle keep going. hate for hurt, hate for hate only multiplies hate.

And slowly but surely, as Martin Luther King used to say, we slowly but surely descend into the spiral of destruction. Only light breaks the spell of darkness and only love can break the chain reaction of hate.

Second, we are to agape love so that our souls do not rot. To keep hating those who hurt us rots our souls, as we all know.

Hate changes the hater. Hate changes the hater. Hate distorts the perspective. Hate distorts our personality. Hate takes a toll on parts of our body.

[18 : 31] I know many people who are sick because they hang on to hate. Hate hurts the one being hated. But more, hate hurts the hater.

You psychologists can tell us that hate divides the personality and only love can reintegrate it. Just before Christmas, I finished reading a book entitled Unbroken.

Unbroken by Laura Hildebrand. This was recommended to me by David Brentalt. It's the story of Louis Zamberini, who I had met years ago, but I didn't know his story, who lived through World War II and suffered in unbelievable ways.

The plane he was flying over the Pacific Ocean was shot down. He drifted on a raft for months, struggling with thirst and dehydration, starvation, with sharks, with enemy planes shooting at him. When he finally did make it to land, he was put into enemy prisons, and there he was treated like an animal. It's awful to read. For years, treated like an animal.

[19 : 46] One prison guard especially treated him in evil, demonic ways. The prisoners called him the bird. By the grace of God, Zamberini made it through that hell and was released to return home at the end of the war.

But he still lived in that hell because of his hate for the bird. And this is how Miss Ildebrand then describes his state of being. No one could reach Louis because he had never really come home. In prison camp, he had been beaten into dehumanized obedience to a world order in which the bird was absolute sovereign. And it was under this world order that he still lived.

The bird had taken his dignity and left him feeling humiliated, ashamed, and powerless. And Louis believed that only the bird could restore him by suffering and dying in the grip of his hands.

A once singularly hopeful man now believed his only hope lay in murder. The pet, and she writes this, the paradox of vengefulness is that it makes men dependent upon those who have harmed them, believing that their release from pain will come only when they make their torment or suffer.

[21 : 10] In seeking the bird's death to free him, Louis had chained himself once again to his tyrant. During the war, bird had been unwilling to let go of Louis.

After the war, Louis was unable to let go of the bird. Slowly, his life fell apart at every level, relationally, psychologically, financially, spiritually.

And finally, his wife decided she just had to get out and to leave him. Cynthia packed her things, took the baby, and walked out. Louis was alone.

All he had left now was his alcohol and his resentment. The emotion that Gene Armory would write nails every one of us onto the cross of our ruined past.

Resentment. The emotion that nails every one of us onto the cross of our ruined past. Blessed be his name, Jesus got a hold of Zamborini.

[22 : 16] love. I will not tell you how, because that will ruin the story for you. But miraculously, and I use the word intentionally, miraculously, he was able to let go of his hate for the bird.

We obey Jesus' command to agape love the enemy because we do not want to spiral down into the pit of hate and because we do not want our souls to rot.

And third, because we want to be whole. That is, we want to be like the father of the Lord Jesus.

Notice how Jesus puts it, love your enemy in order that.

Love your enemy in order that you may be. Love your enemy in order that you may be sons and daughters of your father who is in heaven. The father, Jesus says, causes his son to rise on the evil and the good.

He sends his rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. The love of the father is indiscriminate and scandalous. God loves those who love God and God loves those who do not love God.

[23 : 28] And he is good to both. Dale Bruner puts it most provocatively. 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.

Love. In order that you may be children of the father. This suggests to me that we will obey Jesus' command love to agape love our enemies to the degree that we understand the father heart of God. Love in order that you may be. Not love in order that you may become. In order that you may be. In order that you may be who you are. Be who Jesus has made us to be, children of his father. Be like the father who loves indiscriminately and scandalously. Now this I think is how we're to understand that startling word at the end of the text. You are to be perfect. As your heavenly father is perfect.

[24 : 41] Holy moly. The word is telios which means mature. You are to be mature in love the way your father is mature in love. We will grapple with that next Sunday.

Second question. How? How are we to agape love our enemies in three ways. First in simple deeds.

Agape deeds. Nothing fancy and nothing superheroic. Just deeds of goodness. In Luke's gospel Jesus says do good to those who hate you.

Paul expands on this quoting the proverbs we quoted earlier in his letter to the Romans. If your enemy is hungry feed him. If he is thirsty give him something to drink. Is this pious utopian dreaming or is it the power of the kingdom of God?

John Macarius was the president of a college in Beirut, Lebanon. In the 1980s as the violence began to rise in that city most of the families in their apartment complex evacuated.

[25 : 53] he and his wife decided they would stay. One day they heard these enemy soldiers starting at the bottom and coming layer by layer up the apartment building and beginning to destroy all the apartments.

Soldiers would barge into a room and if someone was left they would beat the person. As they continued their terror John and his wife decided they would make some coffee and they would bring some sweet cakes out of the cupboard.

When the soldiers pounded on their door John opened it and with a big grin he says please come in and have some coffee and some cake you must be very tired and worn out.

And with astonishment the soldiers sat down ate and drank and went on their way. Agape your enemies the simple acts of good will.

And second agape by word. Jesus tells us to pray for those who persecute us and bless those who curse us.

[27 : 07] In the Jewish world to bless or to curse was to speak a word that in some mysterious way made things happen. This is why a Jew is very careful to give a blessing or a curse because once it's spoken you cannot retract it.

Think Isaac and Jacob they gave blessings to the wrong person and they couldn't bring it back.

Shalom aleikum peace to you is more than a polite greeting.

You are asking God to fill the other person with God's peace with God's shalom with God's wholeness. Bless your enemies. Speak words of good will.

May you know the mercy of God. May you be filled with the grace of God. May God not hold this deed against you. Something happens. If not in the enemy, at least in you and me.

Bless those who curse you. And pray. Many people have called this command to pray the supreme command that Jesus ever gave.

[28 : 11] It is the highest act of love to pray for another person. Why? Because in prayer we are bringing the other into the presence of the only one who can give the other life.

It is a great gift bringing the other into the presence of the only one who can give life. It's like bringing your enemy to the doctor. Only this time the doctor can actually do something for your enemy.

living during the reign of Adolf Hitler's rage wrote this through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy stand by his side plead for him to God Jesus does not promise that when we bless our enemies or do good to them they will not despitefully use or persecute us they certainly will but not even that can hurt or overcome us as long as we pray for them for if we pray for them we are taking

their distress and poverty their guilt and perdition upon ourselves and pleading to God for them wow and then here's the line that gets me every time I read it when we pray we are doing vicariously for the enemy what they cannot do for themselves it's the highest act number of years ago Sharon and I were serving a church in California very complex church all kinds of theological social tension in this church people on the right people on the left back and forth right back and forth left just very very complex and one of the small groups in the church asked if

I would come and be their speaker at their retreat so about 20 couples go up into the mountains for this retreat I am aware of this tension and so I choose Paul's letter to the Colossians as the text that I will teach I figured it's safe Paul emphasizes the centrality of Christ and Paul celebrates all the benefits of Christ in Colossians so for all these hours I am teaching with all kinds of joy and enthusiasm as you know I can do at the end of the retreat we're all gathered around and Sharon and I are sitting at the front table we're supposed to debrief and I say isn't this wonderful and a man takes his fist and points it at me he says this is not wonderful this is sick and you are sick you Daryl Johnson are sick for believing that Jesus Christ is the center of all things you're sick for your emphasis on Jesus Christ you're sick for believing that the Bible is the word of God and you're making our church sick with your sick teaching you're sick and on and on and on he went for five minutes no one stood up for me

Sharon is holding bless those who curse you it's the only way to get rid of the curse pray for those who persecute you because you're doing for them what in their hate for you they cannot do as is the case with every one of Jesus commands he's only telling us to do what he does on the cross father forgive them they do not know what they're doing my enemies don't know what they're doing father and millions upon millions have followed him Stephen when he's being stoned together father forgive them James the brother of Jesus who while he's being executed cries out

[32 : 05] I beg you Lord God father forgive them for they know not what to do and here's the gospel in all of this as we keep blessing the enemy as we keep praying for the enemy one morning we wake up and we discover they are no longer enemies but they are brothers and sisters for whom Jesus died through intercessing for them at the foot of the cross the enemy slowly becomes the person for whom Jesus died agape indeed agape in word and third surrender agape love by surrendering to the agape love of God you see we are not empowered to agape the enemy by asking how the enemy treated us we are empowered to agape the enemy by asking how the father treated us and were we not the father's enemies were not every human being once an enemy of the father during this season

I found myself drawn more and more to the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans in that chapter Paul celebrates this scandalous love of God he writes the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us and he rejoices in this outpouring love the question to ask in reading that text is upon whom is all helpless on those who are ungodly says Paul on those who were sinners says Paul while we were still sinners and on those who are enemies says Paul God's enemies while we were enemies God pours his love out on his enemies God goes to the cross for his enemies God goes to the cross for me you've heard it was said you shall love your neighbors and hate your enemies but I love your enemies impossible not if the preacher on the mount knows what he's talking about not if the preacher on the mount takes our wounded hearts in his hands not if the preacher on the mount takes us into his heart and not if you stand beneath the cross of

Jesus and surrender to this massive love for enemies so bring to your mind again this person that you thought about earlier in the sermon and as act of your will pray for them you don't have to like them you may never like them take him or her to the cross if you can you may kneel down by him or her and pray for them people or don't hold where they can