

Love Your Enemies

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Date: 19 February 2017

[0:00] Amen. Amen.

A couple of points to us. First, and this is frightening, it sets a standard that we have all failed to keep. That should, of course, keep driving us to the foot of the cross in repentance, driving us to faith in Christ, driving us to the forgiveness that we find only in him.

Amen. But it also sets before us a pattern of life as disciples, what we should strive for as Christians with the Holy Spirit's help in gratitude for what Jesus has done for us.

So this morning, we hear, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Let me ask a question. Does anyone else find that to be a really hard thing to do?

Anyone? Yeah. Yeah. It's hard for me. I'll admit it. Whatever grace was given to me when I was ordained, it didn't make me sinless.

[2:07] I still struggle with that. Now, I remember in seminary talking to the priest that I went to for confession. We were talking about a resource that he had recommended for doing an examination of conscience before you go to confession.

And one of the questions that was found in that form that he suggested was this. Have I secretly taken pleasure in the misfortune of others? Now, he went on to admit to me that he had never taken secret pleasure in the misfortune of others.

Now, secret or not, we are all wired because of sin to take pleasure in the misfortune of those who have wronged us.

Have you ever felt that thrill? Yeah. Do you know that temptation? I think we all do. We're all tempted not to love our enemies. It's hard when you have a fallen and sinful nature and we are bound to fail.

It happens. But the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives is real, isn't it, brothers and sisters? We will not, of course, and we cannot love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us by our own power.

[3:20] But the Holy Spirit is in the business of changing hearts. Now, why do we find it difficult to love our enemies? And why should we love our enemies?

I want us to think about those questions this morning. Now, sometimes our failure to love those we perceive as our enemies is really just our own fault.

We think someone has insulted us. We think someone hasn't treated us with the respect or deference that we deserve. So sometimes, quite honestly, the trouble is that we have too high of an opinion of ourselves.

And we get mad when others find fault with us, even when they're telling the truth. Charles Spurgeon once said, If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him, for you are far worse than he thinks you to be.

Does that sting a little bit? Yeah? Yeah, it's good that it does, because I think it's supposed to. Sometimes we're mad at people we think of as our enemies because they have a low opinion of us.

[4:32] That temptation to get angry, to get hateful, should go away when we stop to consider ourselves as we really are. The Bible doesn't sugarcoat it.

We read in Romans, Paul cites this, talking about the human condition. None is righteous. No, not one. No one understands. No one seeks God.

All have turned aside. Together they have become worthless. No one does good. Not even one.

Now, brothers and sisters, we are all in that none.

We are not righteous, and we do not do the good that we're supposed to do. When those who would oppose us call us out for who and what we are, let's just remember we really are worse than they think we are.

Considering those who are our enemies because of our many faults, we can, we should, we must understand that they are right. We should love them and pray for them.

[5:41] They're only speaking the truth. Now, sometimes when we're tempted not to love our enemies, tempted not to forgive those who we feel have wronged us, it's because we think we're better than them.

Because we think ultimately that we can sit as judges over them. I think we see that dynamic at work in the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee.

Now, in Jesus' day, the Pharisees and the tax collectors would have seen each other as natural enemies. So, on the one hand, you have those who saw themselves as the righteous defenders of God's law.

On the other hand, you had those who were complying with the occupying Romans and were using their position to defraud others for personal gain and always aware of the fact that they were viewed with contempt as traitors by their fellow Jews.

Natural enemies, not a very warm relationship there. But they, the tax collector, the Pharisee, both went to pray. What happened? What did the Pharisee do?

[6:47] Well, we see it in Luke 18. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. so, did the Pharisee pray for his enemy? No. No. He made use of the opportunity to sit in judgment, to remind God of how superior he was compared to his enemies. Now, what did the tax collector do?

Did he thank God that he wasn't like the self-righteous jerk who was standing over there? No. He said only this. God, be merciful.

To me, a sinner. If you have that kind of attitude, you can pray for your enemies. A sinner who knows God's mercy, sees himself or herself for who he or she really is.

[7:58] Then he can get off his high horse and pray for his enemies because he sees clearly that he's not any better than they are. And sometimes, so, we fail to pray for our enemies because we think too highly of ourselves, and sometimes because we like to sit in judgment over others.

But sometimes, and this is when it gets really hard, we struggle because someone has really treated us with extreme cruelty. And that is when it really gets difficult.

Now, as I was preparing for this sermon, I thought of the reactions of some of those who lost loved ones in the Charleston church shooting that happened in 2015. Does everyone remember seeing that?

So, the killer walked into Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church while a Bible study was going on and shot nine people to death.

Now, I can't imagine what it would take for someone who lost a loved one in that way to forgive the killer and to pray for him. Some of those who lost loved ones did just that.

[9:09] One family member, when he was given the chance to address the killer, had this to say to him, I forgive you. My family forgives you. But take this opportunity to repent.

Repent. Confess. Give your life to the one who matters the most, Christ. So that he can change you and change your ways. Isn't that amazing?

It's hardest to forgive when someone really hurts us. Really, deeply, truly wrongs us. But with God's grace, it can be done because we have seen examples of those who have done it.

And can you imagine what that says to the world about how life-changing it really is to know Jesus and to follow him? Now, there are plenty of reasons we might find for not loving our enemies.

Reasons we might find it to be difficult. There are also plenty of reasons why we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Let's think about those reasons.

[10:16] Now, we see one of those reasons rather obviously in our text in Matthew 5. Now, when I was in seminary, we had a professor who always responded with the same answer when we asked him how he was doing.

And this is what he said. Considering the depths of my depravity and the state of the world, I'm doing pretty well. I think that was his way of saying I'm doing better than I deserve.

But Jesus here is reminding us that God is better to everyone than they deserve. He makes the sun rise on everyone. He sends down rain to water the crops for everyone.

In other words, God shows kindness to everyone, even his enemies. And as disciples of Jesus, as God's children, we are called to be imitators of our Father.

That means loving everyone. Everyone. Showing kindness to everyone. Praying for everyone. Without stopping to think about whether or not they deserve it.

[11:38] None of us deserve God's kindness, but he showers it on us because that is who he is. And our calling is to be like him.

And as Christians, we know and trust in God's kindness in a special way. A way that should drive us especially to love our enemies. We read in Romans 5, For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person. Though perhaps for a good person, one would dare even to die. But God chose his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. Now, brothers and sisters, let's consider ourselves as we really are. We were enemies of God. We were helpless and without hope, it's true, but we were more than just helpless. C.S. Lewis writes, Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement.

[12:49] He is a rebel who must lay down his arms. We didn't need just a little bit of God's help. We were rebels and enemies of our rightful king.

So what did God do about that? He sent his son to rescue us, to die for us, to take away our guilt, to win forgiveness for us.

He called us to faith in Christ and we were justified by the blood of Jesus and we were saved from the wrath that we rightly deserved. Brothers and sisters, if God loved us so much, even when we were his enemies, how could we not love others, even our enemies?

If we have received this kind of mercy, how could we not show mercy to others? And I want us to think of one final reason why we are free to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 6. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

[14:07] In light of that passage, let's ask a question. What is the worst that another person can do to us?

Now the answer, of course, is that the worst that another person can do to us is really bad. Other people can steal from us. They can defraud us. They can abuse us.

They can injure us. They can persecute us. Or even take our lives. Christian history is, in fact, filled with those who were persecuted for their faith in Christ to the point of death.

And that's not just in the past. That's happening in the world now. But at the end of the day, thieves can break in and steal our stuff.

Other people can break in and steal our stuff. Other people can hurt us. Sure. Other people can take our lives. Sure. But, can anyone steal our treasure in heaven?

[15:08] No. Can anyone take away what God has promised and prepared for those who love Him? No. Jesus has purchased our eternal joy with His very blood and no thief is able to take that from us.

We know, then, that God will have the last word in all things. We know that any vengeance belongs to Him and not to us.

We know that anything that we lose, anything that we suffer in this life, pales in comparison to the eternal joy that's prepared for us. And that puts it in perspective.

We look, storing up treasure in heaven. With that in perspective, we are free to love and free to forgive because we know that we have a hope that others cannot take from us no matter what happens.

Brothers and sisters, have you struggled with forgiveness and with loving your enemies? I'll admit that I have. Maybe even now there is someone that you struggle to love, struggle to pray for, and struggle to forgive.

[16:22] And sometimes it's not easy. But our call to be disciples often isn't easy. So when we fail, let's confess our failures to the Lord and pray for the power and the grace of the Holy Spirit to change our hearts.

So this week, the week ahead, think about someone who has wronged you if you're still struggling to love, struggling to forgive, and pray for that person every day.

The way to learn to pray for our enemies and to forgive others and to love those who aren't necessarily lovable is with God's help to jump right in and do it.

Now as Christians, we have all been forgiven much. God has been merciful to us and remembers our sins no more.

And isn't that amazing? We serve a God who loves like that. So let's seek to imitate the God who loves us so much and so freely and who shows grace to the undeserving.

[17 : 32] And the Holy Spirit work in our hearts to transform us into a people who love even our enemies. May others see and glorify our Father in Heaven.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.