

Matthew 5:43-48

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

You Want Me to Do *What?*

In Bill Adler's book of letters from children there is a letter from an 8 year old boy to his pastor: "Dear pastor, I know God wants us to love everybody, but I'm sure He never met my sister. Sincerely, Arnold."

And then there's the famous little rhyme:

To live above with those we love, oh that will be glory.
To live below with saints we know, well that's another story.

Love your enemies? That's one of the most controversial things Jesus ever said. "Impossible," "unrealistic," even "unhealthy"—these have been some of the responses. This morning we will ask four questions of our text.

1. Who are our enemies?

In the brutal world of the first century, that was an easy question to answer. They lived in a world of blood feuds, government oppression, and in-your-face racial hatreds. But what about us? How do we know who our enemies are? Of course there are those who hate our nation. But we can hardly love people we don't even know, except to pray for whole classes of people. No, what Jesus is talking about is something very personal and every-day.

Some of us have seen the enemy: the people who have hurt us. Sometimes these are people close to us. They are people who have treated us wrongly and unfairly. In this fallen world, it would be strange indeed if that never happened.

There are bullies waiting in every school. There are teasers embedded in many families. There are parents who abuse their children. There are children who make life miserable for their parents. The workplace can be a "hostile environment." Even with the church there can be people who hurt us. Some of us can remember deep hurts: the violence, the jeers, the laughter, our tears. We have seen the enemy.

How can we love them?

Some of us have seen the enemy, and they are people we have hurt. As Pogo said, "We have seen the enemy and they is us." There they are, mute (or maybe talkative) reminders of our own

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failings. They may forgive us, or they may not. But we have to forgive them their unforgiveness, and learn to love them. We have to learn that we are not in charge of other people's forgiveness. Even when no reconciliation is possible, we are called to love them.

But how can we love them?

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2. Why love our enemies?

Jesus calls us to love our enemies because hate can only generate more hate. You have probably heard of the famous Old Testament saying, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." We must understand that this commandment was not given to encourage revenge, to but to limit revenge. In those days a blood feud could run for generations and bring harm to many family members, since there was no legal system as we know it when this law was given

Martin Luther King told the following story in his sermon, "Knock at Midnight," "My brother A.D. and I were travelling from Atlanta to Chattanooga on a dark and stormy night. For some reason travelers were very discourteous that night. Hardly a single driver dimmed their lights. Finally, A.D., who was driving, said, 'I've had enough,' as he powered his lights back on bright. I said, 'Don't do that. You are going to cause a wreck and get us killed. Somebody must have enough sense to dim their lights, to break the cycle of hate. If somebody doesn't have the sense to turn on the dim and beautiful lights of love, we are all going to plunge into the abyss.'" The cycle of hate and revenge has to stop somewhere. Jesus says that His disciples are to be a place where it always stops.

We are also called to love our enemies because hate destroys the hater. There is a Chinese proverb: "Whoever pursues revenge should dig two graves: one for the person you hate and one for yourself." The book of Hebrews warns us against "a root of bitterness" that causes long-term spiritual damage (Hebrews 12:14-16).

For almost forty years I have been meeting them, people who have just "disappeared" from a local church. The reason? Someone hurt or wronged them. The tales are monotonously alike. "Let me tell you what so-and-so did to me..." I've sometimes answered, "But that was thirty years ago. Those people are dead now." "It doesn't matter; I'll never go back to that church." What a waste of spiritual energy! What an insult to the love of God!

We are called to love our enemies because the only other option is to become ourselves part of the evil that was done to us.

3. How can we love our enemies?

The first thing we need to remember is that Christian love is not "sleeping with the enemy" as Julia Roberts did in the movie. Christian love is not the friendship of kindred minds that graces our lives. Christian love is not a feeling. We can't make ourselves feel something. Christian love is basically two things: good will and respect. We want the best for all people, even our enemies. This is not a feeling. This is a decision.

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What is it to have good will toward someone? It is to want God's best for them. That's why the only way we can even begin to do this is to **pray** for our enemies. As we pray for them, the Holy Spirit begins to touch our feelings of hurt and anger with His healing love (Romans 5:4-6).

We respect even our enemies as people made in the image of God. We are also called to respect the larger community. True love does not enable evil. When we love our enemies, it means we don't want them to continue in their evil ways. We want them to find God's will for their lives, which includes repentance for sin.

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Let me tell you a true story. Susan Apointe, a suburban homemaker, was walking to her car one day in a shopping mall parking lot when a man with a gun ran up to her. "Get in or I'll blow your head off," he yelled. She answered him, "In the name of Jesus you are not going to blow my head off. Jesus loves you and I don't hate you." He demanded money for a "sick child." She didn't have an ATM card, so she wrote a check for \$600 and went to the bank and cashed it. Then she told him to take her car, she would take the bus. At that the man jumped from her car and ran away. She also helped the police catch him. True love and respect for him meant that she did not want to enable his evil deeds. He needed to face human justice, both for the protection of society, and for his own spiritual welfare. Perhaps when faced with justice he would repent and turn to the Lord. So she worked with the police to help apprehend him. (I'm sorry, but I don't know the end of this story...) The point is not that calling on Jesus will always save you from a car-jacker. There's no promise that gives that guarantee. The point is that she knew what true love is. She treated the criminal with love and respect, but she also turned him in to the cops. There is no contradiction there.

Christian love is a decision I make to seek the best for my enemies. I do this mainly by praying for them, but I am also called to act wisely on their behalf.

4. Is Jesus serious about being perfect? I struggle with perfectionism. People tell me I'm very hard on myself. Some of you know what that's like. And now Jesus is telling me to be perfect? How can I handle that?

C.S. Lewis has helped me to understand this verse. Some think this means God won't help us if we're not perfect. No, that's not what it means. When we ask for His help, this is the only help He can give us. He has only one purpose for us: that we may be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29). And He will achieve His goal of making us perfect one day in glory. But the process has started down here. We may want something less from Him, but He will give nothing less. He is going to make us into perfect creatures one day, and, painful as it sounds, He is already at work on us. No, we are not perfect in this life, but God is at work, shaping us to be more like Christ. Loving our enemies is beyond our power, but not beyond His. After all, He's not asking us to do something that He hasn't already done Himself.