

Praying for Enemies

Scripture: Matthew 5

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But I say to you, love your enemies. (5:44a)

Here is the most powerful teaching in Scripture about the meaning of love. The love that God commands of His people is love so great that it even embraces **enemies**.

William Hendriksen comments,

All around him were those walls and fences. He came for the very purpose of bursting those barriers, so that love-pure, warm, divine, infinite-would be able to flow straight down from the heart of God, hence from his own marvelous heart, into the hearts of men. His love overleaped all the boundaries of race, nationality, party, age, sex.

When he said, "I tell you, love your enemies," he must have startled his audience, for he was saying something that probably never before had been said so succinctly, positively, and forcefully. (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 313)

The scribes and Pharisees were proud, prejudiced, judgmental, spiteful, hateful, vengeful men who masqueraded as the custodians of God's law and the spiritual leaders of Israel. To them, Jesus' command to **love your enemies** must have seemed naive and foolish in the extreme. They not only felt they had the right but the duty to hate their enemies. Not to hate those who obviously deserve to be hated would be a breach of righteousness.

Jesus again sets His divine standard against the perverted human standards of that heretical Jewish tradition and reinforces it with the emphatic **I**. In Greek verbs a pronominal suffix indicates the subject, as here with *lego* (**I say**), and the separate pronoun **I** would not have been necessary had Jesus intended simply to give information.

But here, as in each preceding instance in the sermon (vv. 22, 28, 32, 34, 39), the emphatic form (*ego ... lego*) gives not only grammatical but theological emphasis. In placing what He said above what tradition said, He placed His word on a par with Scripture-as His hearers well understood. Jesus not only placed emphasis on what was said but on who said it. It was not just that His teaching was the standard of truth, but that He Himself was the standard of truth. "Your great rabbis, scribes, and scholars have taught you to love only those of your own preference and to hate your enemies," Jesus was saying. "But by My own authority, I declare that they are false teachers and have

perverted God's revealed truth. The divine truth is My truth, which is that **you shall love your enemies.**"

As we have noted, the Old Testament concept of neighbor included even personal enemies. That is the truth Jesus expands in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point of the parable is not primarily to answer the lawyer's question, "And who is my neighbor?" though it does that, but to show that God's requirement is for us to *be* neighbors to anyone who needs our help (Luke 10:29, 36–37).

The human tendency is to base love on the desirability of the object of our love. We love people who are attractive, hobbies that are enjoyable, a house or a car because it looks nice and pleases us, and so on. But true love is need-oriented. The Good Samaritan demonstrated great love because he sacrificed his own convenience, safety, and resources to meet another's desperate need.

The Greek language has four different terms that are usually translated "love." *Philia* is brotherly love and the love of friendship; *storge* is the love of family; and *eros* is desiring, romantic, sexual love. But the **love** of which Jesus speaks here, and which is most spoken of in the New Testament, is *agape*, the love that seeks and works to meet another's highest welfare.

Agape love *may* involve emotion but it *must* involve action. In Paul's beautiful and powerful treatise on love in 1 Corinthians 13, all fifteen of the characteristics of love are given in verb form. Obviously love must involve attitude, because, like every form of righteousness, it begins in the heart. But it is best described and best testified by what it does.

Above all, *agape* love is the love that God is, that God demonstrates, and that God gives (1 John 4:7–10). "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. ... [and] God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:5, 8). Because of His love, we can love, and "if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:11–12).

When Jesus told the disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 13:34), He had just finished washing their feet as an example of humble, self-giving love. The disciples had done nothing to inspire Jesus' love. They were self-centered, quarrelsome, jealous of each other, and sometimes even argued with and contradicted the One whom they confessed to be their God, Savior, and Lord. Yet everything that Jesus said to them and did for them was completely and without exception for their good. That was the kind of love He commanded them to have for Him and for each other. And that is the kind of love He commands all of His followers to have even for their enemies.

The commentator R. C. H. Lenski writes,

[Love] indeed, sees all the hatefulness and the wickedness of the enemy, feels his stabs and his blows, may even have something to do toward warding them off; but all this simply fills the loving heart with the one desire and aim, to free its enemy from his hate, to rescue him from his sin, and thus to save his soul. Mere affection is often blind, but even then it thinks that it sees something attractive in the one toward whom it goes out; the higher love may see nothing attractive in the one so loved, ... its inner motive is simply to bestow true blessing on the one loved, to do him the highest good. ... I cannot like a low, mean criminal who may have robbed me and threatened my life; I cannot like a false, lying, slanderous fellow who, perhaps, has vilified me again and again; but I can by the grace of Jesus Christ love them all, see what is wrong with them, desire and work to do them only good, most of all to free them from their vicious ways. (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964], p. 247)

Love's question is never who to love-because we are to love everyone-but only how to love most helpfully. We are not to love merely in terms of feeling but in terms of service. God's love embraces the entire world (John 3:16), and He loved each of us even while we were still sinners and His enemies (Rom. 5:8–10). Those who refuse to trust in God are His enemies; but He is not theirs. In the same way, we are not to be enemies of those who may be enemies to us. From their perspective, we are their enemies; but from our perspective, they should be our neighbors.

In 1567 King Philip II of Spain appointed the Duke of Alba as governor of the lower part of the nation. The Duke was a bitter enemy of the newly-emerging Protestant Reformation. His rule was called the reign of terror, and his council was called the Bloody Council, because it had ordered the slaughter of so many Protestants. It is reported that one man who was sentenced to die for his biblical faith managed to escape during the dead of winter. As he was being pursued by a lone soldier, the man came to a lake whose ice was thin and cracking. Somehow he managed to get safely across the ice, but as soon as he reached the other side he heard his pursuer screaming. The soldier had fallen through the ice and was about to drown. At the risk of being captured, tortured, and eventually killed-or of being drowned himself-the man went back across the lake and rescued his enemy, because the love of Christ constrained him to do it. He knew he had no other choice if he was to be faithful to His Lord (Elon Foster, *New Cyclopaedia of Prose Illustrations: Second Series* [New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1877], p. 296).

The Scottish Reformer George Wishart, a contemporary and friend of John Knox, was sentenced to die as a heretic. Because the executioner knew of Wishart's selfless ministering to hundreds of people who were dying of the plague, he hesitated carrying out the sentence. When Wishart saw the expression of remorse on the executioner's face, he went over and kissed him on the cheek, saying, "Sir, may that be a token that I forgive you" (John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, ed. W Grinton Berry [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978], p. 252).

Our “enemies,” of course, do not always come in such life-threatening forms. Often they are ordinary people who are mean, impatient, judgmental, self-righteous, and spiteful-or just happen to disagree with us. In whatever personal relationships we have, God wants us to love. Whether a conflict is with our marriage partner, our children or parents, our friends and fellow church members, a devious business opponent, spiteful neighbor, political foe, or social antagonist, our attitude toward them should be one of prayerful love.

and pray for those who persecute you. (5:44b)

All men live with some sense of sin and guilt. And guilt produces fear, which in its ultimate form is fear of death and of what is beyond death. In various ways, therefore, most people have devised religious beliefs, rituals, and practices they are convinced will offer them some relief from guilt and judgment. Some people try to get rid of guilt simply by denying it or by denying the existence of a God who holds men accountable for sin.

Throughout history the worst persecutions have been religious. They have been the strongest against God’s people, because the divine standards He has given to them and which are seen in them are a judgment on the wickedness and corruption of false religion. God’s Word unmasks people at their most sensitive and vulnerable point, the point of their self-justification-whether that justification is religious, philosophical, or even atheistic.

Because persecution is so often the world’s response to God’s truth, the Lord assures us that, just as He was persecuted, so will we be (John 15:20). Therefore His command for us to pray for our persecutors is a command that every faithful believer may in some way have opportunity to obey. It is not reserved for believers who happen to live in pagan or atheistic lands where Christianity is forbidden or severely restricted.

Jesus taught that every disciple who makes his faith known is going to pay some price for it, and that we are to pray for those who exact that price from us. Spurgeon said, “Prayer is the forerunner of mercy,” and that is perhaps the reason why Jesus mentions prayer here. Loving enemies is not natural to men and is sometimes difficult even for those who belong to God and have His love within them. The best way to have the right attitude, the *agape love* attitude, toward those who **persecute** us is to bring them before the Lord in prayer. We may sense their wickedness, their unfairness, their ungodliness, and their hatred for us, and in light of those things we could not possibly love them for *what they are*. We must love them because of *who* they are-sinners fallen from the image of God and in need of God’s forgiveness and grace, just as we were sinners in need of His forgiveness and grace before He saved us. We are to **pray** for them that they will, as we have done, seek His forgiveness

and grace.

Our persecutors may not always be unbelievers. Christians can cause other Christians great trouble, and the first step toward healing those broken relationships is also prayer. Whoever persecutes us, in whatever way and in whatever degree, should be on our prayer list. Talking to God about others can begin to knit the petitioner's heart with the heart of God.

Chrysostom said that prayer is the very highest summit of self-control and that we have most brought our lives into conformity to God's standards when we can pray for our persecutors. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor who suffered and eventually was killed in Nazi Germany, wrote of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:44, "This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God" (*The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller [2d rev. ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1960], p. 166).

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