

Jesus and Enemies

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Introduction.

As we saw last week, one of the most difficult commands in the Bible to grapple with is the command to turn the other cheek. However, even once we figure out what Jesus wants and put that into practice in our lives, even then, He's still not through with us. Even a worldly person may sometimes turn non-violent, may sometimes cower in the face of overwhelming force simply because there's no point in fighting back. Even we, as we offer no resistance to evil, may do so with hatred in our hearts, holding back simply because we hope God will blast the other guy.

That might seem reasonable to us, but it's not what Jesus wants. As we learn in the next section of the Sermon on the Mount, He doesn't want us simply to do nothing. He wants us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. That, brethren, is a whole 'nother level of challenging! Controlling our outward actions is difficult enough when someone wrongs us, but controlling our thoughts and even our emotions is even worse. However, that is precisely what Jesus expects. He calls us to do something so counter-intuitive that nobody but a disciple would do it.

In fact, the way that we deal with our enemies may well be the single greatest test of our discipleship. We may not have folks who want to harm us or even kill us, but just about all of us have enemies on some level or another. These are the people who go out of their way to make our lives difficult, who don't respect us, who talk us down in front of others, who look for excuses to be angry at us, who thwart us in every way they can think of. Sometimes, the people like this linger in my mind, and sometimes, I get so worked up about them and that I have to seek forgiveness for myself. These are the people we're supposed to love and pray for. Let's see how it works as we consider Jesus and enemies.

Our Command.

Let's begin by looking at our command about loving our enemies, which we find in Matthew 5:43-44. Once again, in this text, Jesus begins by referring to what the Jews have heard from their teachers, or possibly to what a general saying in the culture was. Presumably, they applied themselves to hatred of their enemies with just as much zeal as they applied themselves to love of their neighbors. Once again, though, the Jews are engaged in a misapplication of the Law. We see what God actually said in Leviticus 19:18. They were to love their neighbors, yes, but neither here nor anywhere else in the Law does He command them or even give them permission to hate their enemies. However, the Jews took this idea and weaseled with it until it gave them an excuse to be filled with the hatred they wanted to have all along.

Jesus' teaching, of course, is very different. We are to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who persecute us. In other words, the very last thing in the world that we are inclined to do for our enemies, that's what Jesus wants us to do! The same kind of self-sacrificing love that we have for God, for our brethren in Christ, and for our neighbors, for all the people who fill our lives with love, is the love that we are to have for our enemies. As with Jesus' thoughts on retaliation that we looked at last week, there's a sense in which this is focused especially on those who persecute us for the cause of Christ, but this is a passage we are expected to follow generally. As disciples of Jesus, then, we are required to love absolutely everybody, to be filled with good will toward everybody, and to look for ways to bless everybody, regardless of what they have done to or for us. When we slip in that, when we allow anger and bitterness to seep into our hearts toward anybody at all, we are missing the mark that God has set. Obedience in this does not come naturally to any of us, and reaching this point may well be the struggle of a lifetime.

God's Example.

As much as we may have to battle to live up to this command, we're not left without help. In our quest to love our enemies, we can look to God's example. Jesus tells us so in Matthew 5:45. God is not a God who plays favorites, even when that is warranted by our behavior. He doesn't mess with the sun every morning so that it dawns on Joe Christian, but Joe Christian's evil next-door neighbor is stuck in darkness. He doesn't send the rain to Joe Christian's garden in July while leaving the evil next-door neighbor's lawn to turn into a desert. For that matter, He doesn't offer salvation only to nice, sweet, righteous people, while wicked sinners are doomed no matter how much they want to repent. Instead, God blesses everyone equally, whether the element in question is the sun, the rain, or the gospel. He doesn't do this because he's indifferent to everyone. He does it because He loves everyone, and even though He is saddened when the recipients of His blessing are ungrateful, He doesn't stop blessing them because of it. That same impartial, blessing love is the love that we are supposed to learn from Him and shower on everyone in our lives too.

There are a number of consequences to this, but one of the most important is that it gives us insight into what God's nature is like. Paul explains in Acts 14:16-17. God has never forced anybody to do anything, and before the coming of Christ, He let all the nations of the Gentiles wander around and do what they wanted. However, even while

they were doing that, He left them with a way they could come to know Him. They could consider the blessings of the rain and the harvest, the blessing of the food they had to eat, and the blessing of the joy that filled their lives, and realize that all of those things had to come from the hand of a loving Creator. The providence of God bore witness to His goodness. We see this same witness everywhere around us today. The Bible tells us in James 1 that every good thing we have is a gift from above, and all of these gifts teach us about the Giver. Every time we eat a good meal, it tells us that God is good. Every time we collect a paycheck to support our families, it tells us that God is good. Every time we come in from the winter cold into our nice warm homes, it tells us that God is good. He does these things for us even though none of us are righteous enough to deserve it, because He is righteous, and He loves us.

In the same way, if we love even our enemies and do good for them, it shows that we too are righteous and loving people. Even more than that, it shows that we are Christians. Look at James 2:18. We often use this passage in doctrinal disputes with people who teach that faith only is enough to save, but that wasn't its original intent. Instead, James is telling us that we can say that we are children of God all we want, but it is our good works that prove that we are children of God. If God only blessed His favorites, He wouldn't be any better than we are, but because He blesses everybody, He shows that He is more righteous. In the same way, when we love and bless our enemies, we do something that no one in the world does. Our works demonstrate that we're trying to live up to the example of God.

A Higher Standard.

When we're engaged in this struggle, we are naturally driven to live up to a higher standard than anyone else will use. That call to the higher standard is evident in Jesus' words in Matthew 5:46-48. His point is that our discipleship ought to change our lives, and if it does, we are going to do different things than the people around us. Even people who aren't Christians love those who love them, do nice things for people who help them, and greet the people who are already their friends. If we do nothing more than that, then there is no evidence in our lives that the love of God has changed us at all. Instead, the change starts showing up when we love people who don't love us, do nice things for people who have opposed us, and are friendly toward those who quite frankly hate us. To the extent that we reach that point, we show that we have gotten the message on love and learned to love like God. We have become perfect as He is perfect.

Clearly, this is not the easiest road in the world to walk, but we learn from the records of the early church that Jesus' disciples in the first century took His words here seriously. Consider, for instance, the example of Stephen in Acts 7:60. Just like Jesus did, Stephen faced unjust persecution and death. He was put on trial by the Jewish high council simply for teaching the truth about the gospel. When he responded with another gospel sermon, he was essentially lynched by the judges. They took him out and stoned him to death, even though he hadn't committed even the smallest crime. As this is going on, as Stephen is being martyred by an angry, hate-filled mob, his final prayer is for his murderers. He begged God not to punish them for the evil they were committing. Brethren, I have trouble getting my mind around that. How do you love your enemies so much that you pray for them as they are killing you? Honestly, I wonder if that's why Stephen was the first martyr—he was such a good guy that Satan had to get rid of him. Regardless, it's clear that Stephen didn't reach that point by accident. He did so because of His commitment to follow Jesus and love His enemies.

In a slightly less dramatic way, we see the same thing in the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:12-13. We don't know anything from Scripture about the circumstances of Paul's death, but we do know quite a bit about his life. When Paul says he was treated like the scum of the earth, he wasn't exaggerating. He used to be one of the greatest of the Jewish nation, but once he became a Christian, his countrymen hated him and wanted to kill him. He was plotted against, chased out of countless cities, whipped repeatedly, and stoned to the point where the Jews thought they'd killed him. His life was one unending gauntlet of personal misery, and that was largely because of all of his enemies. His response? When reviled, he blessed. When persecuted, he endured. When slandered, he entreated. Imagine that, folks: city after city, year after year, Paul gets kicked in the teeth repeatedly by the people who should have rejoiced to hear the truth. If I faced such a constant stream of abuse, I think I'd get worn down, but it didn't wear Paul down. Instead, his love for his people was so great that he never stopped trying to teach them, and he would have given up his own salvation to see them saved. Paul may have been despised by his contemporaries, but we have so much to learn from his love for his enemies.

To the wisdom of the world, the conduct of men like Stephen and Paul seems like madness. Why would anybody constantly seek the good of the very people who are persecuting him, making his life miserable, even killing him? We see the reason why in Romans 8:16-17. We need to recognize, brethren, that the trail blazed by Christ is not going to be sunshine and roses. The Bible promises in 2 Timothy 3 that all who desire to live godly will be persecuted, and the more godly we live, the more persecuted we will be. There are people out there who will love us for teaching them the truth, but there are also people who will hate us for it. If we follow the footsteps of Jesus, if we do what He did, we will suffer for it just like He suffered. If we respond to that suffering like Jesus did, if we remain steadfast in our love even for those who cause us pain, that is when the light of Christ will shine forth most brightly in our lives. We will glorify Him here, and in return for that, on the last day, we can be certain that He will exalt and glorify us.