

May 22, 2008

Matthew 5:38-42 / Romans 12:9-21 / Luke 6:27-36

Luke (#24) - Jesus Command to Love our Enemies (and He really means it)!

Today we come to what many have called one of the hardest, if not the hardest command in the whole Bible — the command to love one's enemies!

In fact, it's a command that is so difficult, and so hard for us to imagine how we could ever do it (it's so counter-intuitive as I mentioned last week) that even the most diehard literalist, who will fight tooth and nail to champion a literal interpretation of every verse in the Bible will inevitably find a way to make this one verse non-literal!

In terms of the "days" in Genesis I've seen people fight tooth and nail for a literal 24 hour day interpretation, and refuse to budge an inch in terms of a 6,000 year old earth. I've seen them speak of obvious scriptural metaphors or apocalyptic symbolism in Daniel or Revelation allowing for nothing but an absolutely literal interpretation of every one.

But when it comes to this command to love one's enemies — I've found those same people will almost invariably find a way to make this verse non-literal!

There has not been a single occasion in my 22 years of pasturing, where I've taught on this passage without someone present objecting and saying: "***But how can anyone do that?***" or they'll say, "***Jesus didn't really mean that, or expect us to do that, did He?***" Not once!

In fact, the one that sticks out in my mind the most was when Nancy and I led a Bible Study for the youth (at a former church). It was 1984, so the Iran Hostage Crisis wasn't too far past, and posters of an angry Ayatollah Khomeini who called for the fall of the U.S. were fresh in people's minds, not to mention Hezbollah had just car-bombed the U.S. embassy annex in Beirut killing 22 people.

Anyway, we read this passage and before we were even able to open it up for discussion among the kids, the dad of the girl (whose house we were meeting at) quickly chimed in and said: "***And you know Jesus never meant for us to take that verse literally.***" And one of the young boys in the group also chimed in and in all seriousness said, "***Yeah, I agree. I think we should just go over there and nuke the whole bunch of em' and blow the place off the map.***" (How anyone can study this verse and suggest that response is beyond me!)

I've even heard similar (though less drastic comments) made lately with gas prices threatening to go up to \$5 or 6 /gallon — some of those comments made by people who claim to be followers of the Jesus who calls us to love our enemies.

So, who's right? Did Jesus mean we are to love our enemies or did He not? / Did He mean personal enemies or personal and national enemies? / And by the term "enemies" did He simply mean those people who occasionally pick on us or irritate us, or did He mean those who literally hate us and seek to do us physical harm?

You see, if we look at the history of the early church, it's quite clear that the earliest Christians took it literally. / They took it to mean personal and national enemies. / And they took it to mean those who literally hate us and seek to physically harm us. In fact, it was with that understanding and the responses Christ suggests, that they conquered the Roman Empire for Christ.

Though it wasn't long after the Christians came to power, that things changed, and the majority since then (with the exception of groups like the Amish, Quakers, some Mennonites and Anabaptist groups) have favored a non-literal interpretation, saying "It's a nice utopian ideal, but it would only end in disaster if people actually did it!" (Even though when people actually did it, it led to the conversion of an empire!)

Yet today I need to tell you I stand with the early church, and favor a more literal interpretation, because as I read the passage, I can't help but sense that Jesus means exactly what He says! There are places where Jesus speaks in metaphor, or with overstatement, but this is not one of them.

And the reason I believe it's to be taken literally is because after He says it He goes on to give us 7 practical, everyday ways to do it! He spells out exactly how it is that we are to put it into practice what He commands — something I believe He would not do if He were simply speaking in metaphorical terms.

And I know that means this passage will cause us to wrestle intensely, because it's so contrary to everything we are told and learn in this world! I would agree with Mark Twain, who once wrote: *"Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture which they cannot understand, but as for me, I have always noticed that the passages...which trouble me most are those which I understand all too well."*

I agree, and it challenges me to the core of my being!

So, having said that — and it did need to be said — let's consider the 7 things or the 7 practical everyday ways that Jesus calls us, His disciples, to *"love our enemies"* (which is, by the way, what He says, and is also, I believe, exactly what he means)! So what are they?

FIRST, we are to "love our enemies" by *"doing good to those who hate us."* And the verbs here are all in the future and imperative tense. That is, you haven't done these things, but I now command you to! I even call you to take the initiative in doing them!

To "do good" to our enemies means that we are to do things that "benefit or help them." That's what love is, according to the Bible, seeking to do good, or just plain seeking the good of others.

For instance, I know God loves me, because Scripture tells me that *"In all things God works FOR THE GOOD of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose."* Even in the trials that come my way (painful as they may be), I can be sure He loves me, because by those trials or hardships, says the Author of Hebrews: *"He disciplines me (or us) FOR OUR GOOD."* That's what love is — doing good, or seeking the good of the other person.

That's also why Paul can tell us in the context of working toward a loving, unified, body of believers: *"Each of us should please our neighbor FOR HIS GOOD..."* Or say in relation to everyone, inside or outside the church: *"Let us DO GOOD to all people."* Why? So that they might see by how we are always seeking their good, that we love them!

We could even say: The most loving person is the person who goes around doing the most good, or seeking the good of the most people. Which, interestingly, is exactly how Peter describes Jesus in Acts 10:38: *"He went about DOING GOOD and healing all who were under the power of the devil..."* That is, Jesus went around loving people. That's Peter's point!

And this tells us something else. The stress on "doing" helps us see that Jesus is NOT asking us to feel warm fuzzy feelings for our enemies! That's NOT what Jesus means! Though it is precisely why so many people (who wrongly define love as a feeling) get so confused!

But Jesus is NOT asking us to LIKE our enemies, or have fond feelings for our enemies. That would indeed be impossible! Rather, He's asking us to LOVE them, and love is shown most clearly in actions performed out of an earnest desire to seek the good of that person!

Hate is just the opposite: Hate seeks to do harm to others. *"Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer,"* says the Apostle John, and a murderer is a person who seeks to harm, damage or

seek the demise of another person. Paul says that in **Romans 13:10**, *“Love does no harm to its neighbor, therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”*

Yet here’s the hard part:

Jesus tells us that WE, as those who have entered the kingdom, need to DO GOOD (or seek the good of) not just our families and friends those who hate us, despise us, want to harm us, ridicule us, make fun of us, belittle us, or do unkind, irritating and nasty things to us. He even asks us to do good to those who are trying to harm us physically (or “mistreat us,” as Jesus will go on to point out in the next verse).

And that, my friends, is hard indeed. In fact, it’s not only hard to do, it’s hard to even think about doing! Yet it ***IS*** what Jesus calls us to do! We are, as God’s people, called to ***“overcome evil with good.”*** That is, overcome evil by doing good to those who do evil things to us.

Paul, in **Romans 12:20**, essentially gives believers the same exact advice as Jesus did when he writes: ***“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil (that is, the desire for revenge, or the desire to curse, harm or kill your enemy), but overcome evil with good.”***

In other words, God calls us to follow the example of Jesus Himself who overcame evil by doing good to the very people who were killing Him. Asking God to forgive them, and even moreso, taking upon Himself the sins of all His tormentors who would come to believe, that they might actually and eternally be saved.

LISTEN: *Responding to evil and violence, with evil and violence, only breeds more evil and violence!*

That, I believe, is why Jesus calls us not to follow or go with our natural “survival of the fittest instinct” to harm and crush and get back at our enemies back with vengeful acts of retaliation, but instead go against our natural fleshly inclination for revenge, follow the way of love, and seek to do them good. Seek their ultimate good.

So, I ask you: Hard as it is (and we’d be fools to say it’s not hard) will you do it? Will you seek to do good to your enemies? Not because you want to, but because Jesus asks you to! And not in your own power! That’s not possible. We can’t even desire to do such an unnatural thing apart from the grace God provides!

But that's the whole point — God gives HIS grace and HIS strength to HIS people when they step out in faith to do HIS will, and His will is that we love our enemies.

SECOND we "love our enemies," says Jesus, by "*blessing those who curse us.*" That is, we love them by asking God to bless them or by praying blessings down upon them, instead of following our natural, fleshly instinct to pray curses or harmful things or evil things down upon them.

Jesus could mean little more than verbally blessing those who curse or cuss at you. Verbally blessing them after they have done something to purposely taunt or hurt you. Or He may be speaking of the very common practice, in many third world cultures (where people believe intensely in the power that blessings have to strengthen and protect, and the power that curses have to injure or cause harm) of invoking supernatural powers to harm someone!

As a somewhat naïve 21 year old, I went to the Dominican Republic, only to discover that many people there believed very intensely in the power of certain individuals to invoke a blessing or a curse on other people. In fact, some people actually made a living by invoking blessings or curses on other people!

If someone had done something bad to you, you would get them back at them by going to these particular individuals, paying them a fee, and they would literally (often through incantations or ritualistic ceremonies or animal sacrifices resembling the voodoo practiced more earnestly on the other half of the island in Haiti) invoke a curse upon that individual, or their business, or their family. It's common practice in many 3rd world settings.

They use magic / or ask God / or the spirits / or Satan / to frustrate or harm or make that person sick or in the worst case scenario, die in some type of accident. And although we in the states don't (or haven't in the past) tended to put much weight in such things, there's probably not a person here, who in a moment of anger, or frustration, or rage, hasn't succumbed to the very human inclination to want or desire or pray for harm to befall another individual. What Jesus would call "cursing them."

Not to actually doing them physical harm, but simply wishing them harm, or wishing that something terrible would happen to them, or hoping for their demise, or actually praying that some calamity would befall them.

But Jesus says, "No! Not if you're my disciples. That's the natural response. That's the flesh speaking. That's your injured pride wanting revenge! And I call you to something different! Something higher than mere animal instinct! Others curse those who curse them. They ask or pray for bad things to happen to those who have done them wrong. But I call you to do just the opposite — to bless them or literally pray a blessing down upon them."

That's the prayer I've prayed many times for Osama bin Laden and many others like him. Not that God would crush him, but that God would bless him with salvation. Not that our country would (like that boy said) "Go over there and nuke them all." But that God, by His grace, would do a miracle and change their hateful hearts — like He did with me.

That His mercy would bring them to repentance — like it did with me. That He would take their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh — like He did with me. Take their cold, selfish, sin-loving spirits and give them a new spirit — like the one He's given to us — the Spirit of Jesus, who like His Father, "is merciful" and "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." (v. 35)

What more could anyone ever ask for or want? What would do the world more good? What would bring God the most glory? To kill Osama, or to have Osama (like the Apostle Paul who was himself somewhat of a terrorist) transformed and changed into a preacher the Gospel of God's grace? To see him destroyed, or to see him repent and transformed into one who seeks to follow Jesus in the way of non-violence?

Which would best display the character of the One who calls us to love our enemies? To angrily gnash my teeth in rage and pray for evil to fall on such an infidel (thus making me just like him) or to be as unlike him as I can and pray for his ultimate good — the conversion of his soul?

"But he needs to be brought to justice," you say. And God may choose to do that. But in the mean time, what does Jesus ask us to do? Pray that God would harm and curse him / or pray that God would bless him with the greatest blessing of all — a new heart and a new spirit which would make our enemy (to the greater glory of God) a penitent friend and a preacher of peace?

"But Jeff, you know it will never happen!" you say. To which I say "Be careful, my friends, lest by saying it could never happen to him, you deny the extent of the miracle it took for God to make it happen in you." The miraculous power He exerted to change your heart of stone into a heart of flesh, and your rebellious, contrary, sin-loving spirit into a new Spirit — the Spirit of Him who literally (and not metaphorically) went to the cross to save God's enemies (Rom. 5:8-10)!

THIRD we love our enemies by *“praying for those who mistreat us.”* Like that person at work who seems to have it out for you, or that irritating, uptight, vindictive boss who you just can’t seem to please no matter how hard you try. / Like that mechanic who ripped you off / or that neighbor who says things about you that just aren’t true / or that person who ran the red light, and then lied to the cops about who was at fault while you were standing right there (and wanted to take their head off)!

That is, until you remember you’re a disciple of the Jesus who calls you “to love your enemies,” “be kind to the ungrateful and wicked” and “to be merciful just as your Father in heaven is merciful.” And thus, instead of taking a swing at them, you pause and pray for them.

That’s the advice I’ve given to countless people: *“If you don’t like someone; if they irritate or frustrate you; if you despise them so much you would rather pretend they don’t even exist, or want them gone completely, then you need to pray for them. Because it’s hard to continue to despise someone you are earnestly, honestly and fervently praying for.”*

Pray for your “enemies,” and you will notice the hate in your heart starts to diminish, and that God will actually whisper in your ear and tell you things you can do that will change their heart toward you — things you never would have thought of doing.

Then **FOURTH** we love our enemies by “offering the person who has struck us on one cheek, the opportunity to strike us on the other cheek as well.” Incomprehensible as it sounds, that is what Jesus says. To strike someone on the cheek is an act of public humiliation, usually countered by a fist in the face! Yet Jesus says no. Not only are you not to retaliate, you are to offer him the other cheek.

And you say “How on earth could anyone do that?” Better yet, “How can turning the other cheek be an act of love toward one’s enemy?” And I believe the answer is this: It’s an act of love, because it’s a display of two things that an aggressive person needs:

1st) It’s a display of how a secure person, a whole person, a saved person responds to insult. It’s a display of how Jesus went on to respond to those who crucified Him. An insecure person with a weak ego and a wounded pride can never turn the other cheek — ever! In fact, the more insecure they are, the more they need to retaliate! As any good psychologist will tell you, the bully is a person who seeks to mask and hide their deep-seated fears and insecurities by making people think they are just the opposite.

Their own awareness of their inner fears and insecurities drive them to the need to convince people that they're strong and tough! That's why won't allow any insult go unanswered, and even seek opportunities (like an aggressive dog) to put others down.

The secure person, on the other hand, isn't driven to prove anything to anyone, because they're sure of who they are! They can let the insults of insecure people slide, because they have no need to prove anything to anybody! In fact, far from wanting to strike them, they pity them.

Non-retaliation or turning the other cheek is not something people who are afraid do (if they were afraid of being hit they wouldn't let them hit the other cheek)! No, its something people who are secure do — something only secure people can do — security (as we've seen from our study in Galatians) that comes from God's unconditional love and gracious acceptance and adoption and approval of us, in Jesus.

And **2ndly**) Turning the cheek is an act of love to our enemies, because it's what they need to help them see how insecure they are, and how much they need the inner strength that comes from Jesus.

No bully is ever changed by being pounded into the ground! The bully is changed by seeing in their victim such a superior inner strength and lack of concern about defending their wounded pride (which is what the bully feels an unquenchable compulsion to do) that they are convicted of their weakness and lack of inner strength and driven to desire the strength they see in you.

And I could go over all the others:

- 5.) "If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic." Or to paraphrase it, "If someone steals from you, let him take more than he initially came to steal!"
- 6.) "Give (or loan) to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, don't demand it back."
- 7.) "Loan money to your enemies..."
- 8.) "Do unto others as you would have them do to you."

You see, Jesus point is this: *If you respond to your enemies like the world does how can you claim to be different? / If you respond like the world does, how can you say you're a citizen of heaven? / If you hate and curse and strike and mistreat and kill those who mistreat you how can you say you're any different than anyone else?*

That's Jesus point in verses 32, 33 and 34! *"If you love only those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' (or unbelievers) love those who love them... Even 'sinners' loan money to those who will pay them back in full."*

But Jesus calls us to an ethic that surpasses that of the unbelievers around us:

I'm glad that when I used to break into houses, the owner didn't shoot me. I'm grateful that when I stole that car no one put a bullet in my back. / I'm glad I was shown mercy by God, because it was that mercy, shown to an ungrateful and wicked person like me that changed my life.

And if we do what Jesus says in this passage, we have the same opportunity to change the lives of others.

Not all will be changed. But some will. Maybe only one will — but even then, it would all be worth the struggle it took to do good to my enemy, the restraint it took to bless that person who was trying to hurt me, and the struggle it took to pray for that person who mistreated me.

If only one person was changed, it was one who might not otherwise have been changed — and that would make it all worthwhile.