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EDINBURGH

Love Your Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48 Love Your Enemies

“The Christian life has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” (G.K. Chesterton). Jesus’s command to love our enemies is one of the most obvious examples of this being the case.

1. Why should we love our enemies?

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:10-11)

Jesus makes His argument by telling us about God’s nature (*Matthew 5:44, 45, 48*). God is overflowingly generous, even doing good to those who do evil. Jesus demonstrated this when He was on earth (*Matthew 23:37-38, Luke 23:34*). This is not to say that God does not hate and punish wickedness, but Jesus doesn’t make mention of it at this point.

2. How can we love our enemies?

It’s impossible but with God all things are possible. The story of the gospel is where this all begins: we were weak, sinners, objects of wrath, enemies, alienated, hostile, doing evil and yet Jesus came and died for us (*Romans 5:6-10, Colossians 1:21-22*). We weren’t lovely but God loved us. Realising this and letting it get to work in our thinking by the power of the Holy Spirit is transformative.

3. What does loving our enemies look like?

a. Love them (*Matthew 5:44*). Loving isn't liking, it's a settled decision to do someone good, however you currently feel about them. Look to be a peacemaker (*Proverbs 15:1, Romans 12:18, Matthew 18:15*).

b. Bless them (*Matthew 5:45, see also Luke 6:28*). Blessing someone means practically doing them good – and leaving any vengeance to God (*Romans 12:14-21*).

c. Pray for them (*Matthew 5:44*). Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “*Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God... We are doing vicariously for them when they cannot do for themselves.*” Ask God to be merciful to them as He was to us. We can be honest with God in prayer, and hope that He will change us to be more like Him.

(The preach made barely any mention of forgiveness but it's obviously a very important related subject. A book that I've had recommended by people I trust, though I haven't read it myself, is *Unpacking Forgiveness* by Chris Brauns. Ken Sande's writings, based around the title *The Peacemaker* are also recommended.)

Questions:

- What is your immediate, unpolished response to being told to love your enemies? Why is it so hard for us to do this?
- Does anyone have personal experience of doing this? (Remember that “enemy” may have a broad definition.)
- How would you attempt to persuade someone who wasn't a Christian to do this?
- How is God's understanding and expression of love different from what we expect?
- Why is it so important to know the story you're in, the kingdom you're in, and whose power is in you?
- Luke didn't talk much about God's justice (*e.g. Romans 12:19-20*) – how could our knowledge of this influence how we think about those who do wrong to us or other people?
- There are passages in the Bible that talk about us defeating our enemies and God punishing His enemies – what should we make of those in light of what Jesus says here?
- What does it look like to love / bless / pray for those who cause us trouble? What

steps could you take this week to start doing this?

- Read out the two quotations below from Christians who had to wrestle with loving their enemies. Remembering that they were ordinary people who asked God to work His powerful love in them, what can you learn from their example?

Martin Luther King, preaching during the campaign for civil rights in America: “To our most bitter opponents we say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-co-operation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is co-operation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.” (Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love*)

Corrie ten Boom, recalling meeting a man who had imprisoned her and her sister during the Second World War: “It was in a church in Munich that I saw him – a balding, heavysset man in a grey overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favourite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander’s mind, I liked to think that that’s where forgiven sins were thrown. ‘When we confess our sins,’ I said, ‘God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. ...’ “The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room. And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the centre of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister’s frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! [Betsie and I

had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent.] “Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’ And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze. “‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying, ‘I was a guard there.’ No, he did not remember me. ‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein,’ again the hand came out—‘will you forgive me?’ And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? “It could not have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. ‘If you do not forgive men their trespasses,’ Jesus says, ‘neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.’ I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that. And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘... Help!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’ “And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’ For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then” (Corrie ten Boom, *I’m Still Learning to Forgive*)



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