

Praying for Our Enemies

Luke 6:27-28

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Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor but hate your enemy.’” (Matt. 5:43) Have you heard that? I certainly have. Everybody thinks love of neighbor is a good thing and almost an equal number think hating your enemy is a good thing. That’s the way we view the world: it’s all about the good guys vs. the bad guys, whether it’s the Red Sox and the Yankees, or the Allies and Al Qaeda. The world as we understand it is one big video game in which monsters show up and you try to zap them. Either Obama is the villain or the Tea Party is. The polarization of politics makes it easy to hate your enemy.

Of course Jesus knew that there is no command in the Old Testament to “hate your enemy,” but that’s what happens when you keep an enemies list. It’s hard not to see the attitude Jesus was talking about when you see the righteous hatred of the Israeli government for the Palestinians. And the truth is that I wouldn’t have a hard time from the Old Testament convincing you that hatred is a virtue. There are plenty of psalms, for example, praying against enemies: “Strike all my enemies on the jaw” (3:7), “Let death take my enemies by surprise” (55:11), “Happy are those who seize [the enemies’] infants and dash them against the rocks” (137:9).

Against all that tradition and the cultural norms, Jesus says “But I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:44-5). Your heavenly Father is generous to the good guys and the bad guys. God blesses his friends and his enemies. As the apostle Paul later reminded us, it was while we were God’s enemies that he reconciled us to himself by the death of his Son (Romans 5:10). Jesus says to the religious people of his day, “You are thinking that God hates the wicked, so you should, too. Not true! Look at the evidence. God blesses the wicked all the time. Be like God.”

My chaplain at Princeton University—and later my boss—was a Scot named Ernest Gordon. He was one of the prisoners of war in Burma who built the bridge over the River Kwai. It was in the Japanese prison camp that he became a Christian. He was in the death ward when two Christian soldiers came to feed him and clean him every day, and it was their faith that led him to Christ. Since he was one of the few with a college education, he began to teach and preach in the camp.

At the end of the war, the British prisoners were being shipped out in boxcars. They found themselves on the same track with several cars of Japanese soldiers who had been wounded. They had been left on their own with no medical care, covered with dried blood and excrement. Their wounds were crawling with maggots. They were waiting to die. Ernest Gordon and his comrades looked at their enemies and without a word, began to unbuckle their packs and take out part of their rations, some rags, and water canteens—and went over to the Japanese train. They knelt down next to the enemy soldiers to give them food and water and bind up their wounds. It was a moment of grace. 18 months earlier, he said, they would have attacked their enemies when they were down—but they had learned from Jesus to love their enemies.

How can you love your enemies? I want you to look closely at two verses printed in the bulletin: Luke 6:27-28. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” There are four commands there. This was a regular device in Hebrew rhetoric, repeating the same thing a second time in just slightly different words. We call it Hebrew parallelism,

and you find it all through the Old Testament. Make a little chart on paper or in your head, with one column for the verbs and another for the objects of those verbs.

Love	Your enemies
Do good	Those who hate you
Bless	Those who curse you
Pray for	Those who mistreat you

On the left you have these four parallel verbs: love, do good, bless, pray for. Those are all similar in intent, but you can tell that there are two pairs. To love is the same as to do good (love in the Bible is never just an emotion, it's a course of action)—and to bless is the same as to pray for (to bless means to pray for God to bless someone). In the right hand column you have to four objects of these verbs: your enemies, those who hate you, those who curse you, those who mistreat you. Those are pretty much interchangeable, right? Those who hate, curse, and mistreat us are our enemies. How are we commanded to respond to them? Two ways: with loving deeds and by praying for them.

I don't think I've taken seriously enough the command to pray for my enemies. In all the years I printed up prayer lists, I never had a category for enemies. We had the sick, the grieving, the lost—but not enemies. I noticed this week that this is one of the few commands of Jesus that Paul quotes verbatim in Romans 12:14, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." When Paul is describing how he deals with hard times in 1 Corinthians he says "when we are cursed, we bless" (4:12)

What would it do to us if we began to pray for the people who hate us? What if we prayed for everyone we have a right to be angry with? Most of you know something about the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom we studied this summer with our intern. He died in a Nazi prison camp, but he wrote this about loving and praying for our enemies:

This is the supreme command. Through the medium of prayer we go to the enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God. Jesus does not promise that when we bless our enemies and do good to them they will not spitefully use and persecute us. They certainly will. But not even that can hurt or overcome us, so long as we pray for them.

I know what you're thinking: This is talk for saints. This is impossible. Besides, this is a command for wartime, for extreme situations, not for my everyday life on the island.

I don't think so. I think Jesus is talking directly to us. He was talking to followers whose enemies were their own parents, or their home synagogue, or the policeman on the street. He was talking to the poor who were mad as heck at the rich, and he was talking to patriots who hated the Romans.

You may want to push this message aside and say "I don't have any enemies." Come on, everybody has enemies. Jesus defines enemies as those who hate you or curse you or mistreat you. Nobody ever mistreats you? Nobody ever has? If you are so perfect that no one could dislike you, believe me, there are people who hate you because you are so perfect. Some of you are absolutely obsessed with your enemies, and you are angry all the time. It might be a former spouse, or a family member who abused you, or someone you have an argument with. Some of you have buried that down pretty deep, or maybe you've made real progress in forgiveness. But all of us have enemies. You may not have as many as I do, but you can think of someone who doesn't want what is best for you.

So I'd like you to act like Richard Nixon today and make out your own enemies list. Then take that list and turn it into a prayer list. This is the experiment I'd like you to try: don't start with trying to love your enemy. Because we think of love as a deep-seated emotion, that's going to be really hard to do. We can't stir up warm feelings for a person by an act of will. But what we can do is to pray for that person. As we did in the litany earlier, pray "Bless them always in every way." Pray for the other person's healing. Pray for their spiritual growth. Pray that whatever's eating them will be resolved. Pray

it not so they will leave you alone but so that they can be whole. Just move your lips and hope your heart will someday follow.

I have a strong hunch that if you pray for the person who is driving you crazy, eventually you'll be a lot less crazy. Some psychologists recently did a study about prayer and negative emotions. The *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* published a series of studies that suggests saying a prayer for another person may help reduce negative emotions. After people were intentionally insulted, asking them to pray for a person in need helped calm them down. One researcher said, "We found that prayer really can help people cope with their anger, probably by helping them change how they view the events that angered them and helping them take it less personally."

Henri Nouwen said it more profoundly:

Every time we overcome impatience with our opponents and are willing to listen to the cry of those who persecute us, we will recognize them as brothers and sisters too. Praying for our enemies is therefore a real event, the event of reconciliation. It is impossible to lift our enemies up in the presence of God and at the same time continue to hate them....Prayer converts the enemy into a friend and is thus the beginning of a new relationship [from *Compassion*].

This is the secret Jesus knew: it is impossible to pray for someone and continue to hate them. Jesus knew that it is hate that destroys us. It is the desire for retaliation, which we call justice, which will be our undoing. Jesus does not want to give up seeking the justice God wants—justice for others, for the poor and oppressed. But Jesus *does* want us to give up seeking justice for ourselves, just as he himself did. There is no way to seek justice for yourself without becoming self-centered and turning everything into an us-vs.-them scenario. Instead of battling your enemy in court, on the phone, in the press, by email, in business meetings, in gossip sessions, *pray* for that person. I'm not saying "tell everyone else how much that person needs prayer." No, in your own private time with God, intercede for the one who hates you. Pray God's very best for that person.

The Book of Common Prayer includes a prayer under the heading "For our enemies:"

O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth: deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

May that be our prayer.