

You Want Me to Love Who?
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Luke 6:27-38 (NRSV)

²⁷ “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. ^[a] Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Jesus tells us that for us to inherit eternal life, we must follow the greatest commandments which are to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. In the Gospel of Luke when the discussion of loving God and neighbor arises, there is a question about who my neighbor is. Jesus then tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan. There was doubt and questions about who a neighbor is? When we hear Jesus teach about loving enemies, there is no follow-up question, “So Jesus, who is my enemy?” Why do you think that is?

I think it’s because God and Jesus know us very well. So much so that it’s not important to even engage in a discussion of defining what an enemy is. If you **think** that person, that group, that organization has wronged you, oppressed you, or hurt you – love them. Don’t get bogged down or mired in hatred or anger – theirs or yours. Acknowledge it, recognize it and then begin the work that God and Jesus instruct us to do – love your enemies.

LOVE my enemies?! You want me to **LOVE** someone who has hurt me?!

Too often this idea trips us up and we struggle to engage with this teaching because we inaccurately interpret it to me that we **should** allow our “enemies” to oppress, mistreat and hurt us without repercussions or consequences, which is not what Jesus was teaching at all. Never forget that Jesus was a radical. He understood and taught God’s laws and directives in ways that were creative, unconventional, life-changing, and world-changing. **LOVING** your enemy does not mean that they get away with having hurt you! It does not mean that you are to allow them to continue hurting you. That is NOT what Jesus is teaching. Loving your enemies is difficult and complex – that’s why we have God and Jesus to help us through it. Without them, we most certainly could not do it.

During Martin Luther King Jr's life, he preached on "loving your enemy" several times. I listened to a recording of his sermon "loving your enemy" that he preached in 1957 and it provided solid insight that bears repeating. In it, he commented on how he tried to preach that topic annually because of its importance, but also so that he could add new insights and experiences to his understanding of Jesus' teaching. Dr. King said of Jesus' commandment for us to love our enemies,

"Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies."

"Because Jesus wasn't playing; because he was serious. We have the Christian and moral responsibility to seek to discover the meaning of these words, and to discover how we can live out this command, and why we should live by this command."

Dr. King approached the question, 'How do you go about loving your enemies,' practically, saying,

"I think the first thing is this: In order to love your enemies, you must begin by analyzing self."

[Looking beyond the fact that some people will hate you because of things beyond your control, like your skin color or your height, might there be something that you've said or done in the past that could have aroused anger in them? If, by chance, you may have said or done something that could have caused someone to hate you, you get the opportunity to reflect, repent and redeem.]

"A second thing that an individual must do in seeking to love his enemy is to discover the element of good in his enemy, and every time you begin to hate that person and think of hating that person, realize that there is some good there and look at those good points which will over-balance the bad points." [Dr. King noted that, "within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good. [He quoted Paul in Romans 7:19 who said, 'I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do.' When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals.... And as you seek to hate him [or struggle to love him], find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you will take a new attitude."]

[A third thing to do is,] "when the opportunity presents itself for you to defeat your enemy, that is the time which you must not do it...That is the meaning of love. [When we hold others accountable, it's not for the sake of gloating or conquering, but for the great goal of love.] In the final analysis, love is not this sentimental something that we talk about. It's not merely an emotional something. Love is creative, understanding goodwill for all [others]. It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system."

[This kind of love, the kind that Jesus is speaking about in this scripture, is AGAPE love, which is] "something of the understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all [humanity]. It is a love that seeks nothing in return. It is an overflowing love; it's what theologians would call the love of God working in the lives of [humans]. And when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love [others], not because they are likeable, but because God loves them. You look at [everyone], and you love [them] because you know God loves [them]."¹

¹ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

In high school, I was heavily involved with the drama club and choir. For those who know me I'll pause for your reactions of shock and amazement. In my senior year, our drama teacher decided to do the play, The Diary of Anne Frank, which was a stage adaptation of Anne Frank's posthumously published diary. My drama teacher was Jewish, so choosing to do that play carried a lot of meaning for her. Doing that production was an amazing experience for me because besides the theatrical value, I learned a lot about the holocaust and the Jewish experience. I learned about God, love and hope in the ways that Jesus speaks about when he says, "love your enemies."

When I worked on that production at the age of 17, in order to better understand Anne Frank's life and the holocaust, our drama teacher took us to a local synagogue so we could experience worship and afterward we met with a holocaust survivor. He showed us the tattooed number on his forearm and spoke of his fears and hopes during that time. It was a very sobering moment and unlike anything a museum could have offered me.

I understood Anne Frank's life and her perspectives discovered in her diary in a completely different way. For having died at the young age of 16, Anne Frank was truly an amazing person of great insight and immense love.

One of the most famous quotes from her diary is, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart." Despite the horrendous tortures surrounding Anne Frank's life and although she lived in 450 square feet of space with seven other people, she focused on God's ideal life for all of us – a life of love. Think on this - she and seven other people lived in those cramped living quarters for 49 months before they were discovered. In her diary she described the living space as "relatively luxurious compared to other hiding places they had heard about."² Her abilities to see goodness and positive were outstanding.

Anne Frank could certainly declare that she had enemies – people, organizations and systems that oppressed her, hurt her, and eventually would kill her.

Some other quotes from her diary:

* "In the long run, the sharpest weapon of all is a kind and gentle spirit."

* "I've found that there is always some beauty left -- in nature, sunshine, freedom, in yourself; these can all help you."

* "I don't think of all the misery, but of the beauty that still remains."

So how did she maintain such a loving, positive, and hopeful outlook? She loved her enemies by resisting their attempts to frighten her into a worthless and fear-filled life. Was she frightened? I guarantee it. Was her existence fraught with dread and fear? Likely. She was in a position in which the only way she could love her enemies was by not allowing their hatred to corrupt her heart and affect her purity. Anne Frank said, "I don't want to have lived in vain like most people. I want to be useful or bring enjoyment to all people, even those I've never met. I want to go on living even after my death!"

Choosing to respond with love is difficult – Jesus did so and was murdered. Martin Luther King Jr. did so and was assassinated. Anne Frank was an innocent, loving child and killed simply because of blind hatred.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Frank_House

Countless other throughout time have chosen love as a response to hate and have been hurt, oppressed, imprisoned, and killed...so, why should we not be utterly discouraged and just give up?

Because if we trust in God and believe in Jesus' teaching, we know it is THE WAY!

We love our enemies because God and Jesus both knew that the cycles of violence, evil and hatred could only be overcome through love. If we repay evil with evil it continues forever and only stops when we choose to respond in love, thereby breaking the cycle. It's unfortunate that these cycles have been going on for millennia and continue because too few people choose love as a response to hatred, but we must not lose hope.

I've seen a meme going around on social media that says something to the effect of, "Love your Enemies ... Nothing Annoys them More!" While it's amusing, it's not necessarily true and it doesn't really abide in Jesus' teaching. Yes, being nice, kind and loving toward someone who's mean and nasty to you **might** anger or annoy them, but will it help them? Will it ultimately benefit you?

There is a Native American anecdote: A grandfather talking to his young grandson tells the boy he has two wolves inside of him, struggling with each other. The first is the wolf of peace, love and kindness. The other is the wolf of fear, greed and hatred. "Which wolf will win, grandfather?" asks the young boy. "Whichever one you feed" is the reply.

Think about your enemy's hatred – not about how it affects you, but how it affects them. Hate destroys people from within. There are many studies that conclusively show that people who hate, not only can affect those who they hate, but suffer from severe physical, emotional, and psychological damage themselves. Hatred causes people to live less than ideal lives and it warps how they see things.

Matthew 5:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your [God]; for [the Creator] makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Loving your enemies, is transformative, for us and them. It allows them to witness and experience a radical response that hopefully will shift their perspective and alter how they think and behave. Don't give up – keep responding in love. It will also transform us, helping us to love broader, deeper, and more easily. Such radical love benefits the entire world, we only need to be brave enough to do it.

AMEN