Love Your Enemies; Pray for Those Who Persecute You

Texts:
 Matthew 5:44
 Romans 12:14; 17-19
 Proverbs 24:17

In Matthew 5, Jesus says to his disciples:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’

It turns out that this biblical injunction to love our enemies is not an isolated statement that can be dismissed as some weird, unreasonable standard. Indeed, similar statements are found scattered *throughout* the Bible. I looked it up on a [website](https://abwe.org/blog/15-convicting-bible-verses-pray-over-enemies/), which offered fifteen different statements in the Bible about loving your enemies … and not just in the Gospels or even just the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, Joseph forgives his brothers joyfully, saying “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Gen 50:20) Joseph expresses love for his brothers who have been — and, for all we know, may continue to be — his enemies.

Proverbs tells us: “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles.” (Prov 24:17)

Paul writes in Romans, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” (Rom 12:14)

This commandment to love *even our enemies* may seem an impossible ideal that only the rare saint can aspire to. But I’d like to suggest to you the opposite: Loving our enemy is, in fact, a realistic expectation that any of us can meet, that can be a source of great joy in our lives. To love another person is not some monumental goal; it does not take some extraordinary action. Nor does it mean necessarily liking the person and it certainly doesn’t mean enabling a person who has wronged us by forgetting what they’ve done or setting ourselves up to be abused again.

Rather, it seems to me that when Jesus commands us to love our enemy, he is talking about straightforward agape love. The definition of that love that Jesus points to is simply to *want the best for that person*. In *action,* we may express that love well or poorly, but it requires no action to *want* the best for another.

One way that we can avoid this biblical commandment to love our enemy is to make “love” an impossible ideal filled with flowery images of rare saints kissing lepers. But while those stories of the saints can be wonderful and inspirational, they can obscure the reality that the biblical commandment is not an unreasonable goal for the rare person of uncommon moral character. It is something any of us can choose to do. We can want the best for our enemy.

In the reality, of course, trying to put into practice this wanting-the-best for another person can get impossibly complicated by our own feelings of anger, hate, despair, attraction, and so on. We can find ourselves limited by our own brokenness as well as by the day-to-day realities imposed by trying to act out our love for all the other people in our lives. So I’m not saying that *acting out the* love for others is easy or uncomplicated or straightforward or even possible. But the basic commandment: love one another, *want* the best for one another, is not so difficult, even for our enemies. We can all do it, and we can choose to hold ourselves accountable for it.

Love our enemies. We can all do it.

I should qualify what I’m saying by admitting to you that I’ve never really had an enemy. No one has ever really hurt me intentionally.

To give a sermon like this in the face of the evil of the Hamas attack and the reciprocal evil of the attacks on Gaza, or of the evil of the war in Ukraine when I have lived such a life of privilege can invite the accusation of naïveté on my part. Yet we must remember that Jesus — who admonished us so unequivocally to love our enemy — grew up and lived under the oppressive Roman occupation of Palestine.

So, in all my naïveté, I stand by this truth that was so central for Jesus.

Kathy Doan spoke earlier this year about this love and pointed to a deeper dynamic. She wrote that God’s love is

the kind of love that wishes only the best for another person, that wants what God wants for that person, for them to be happy and whole and free to offer the gifts that God has given them to the benefit of the wider community.

When a person experiences God’s love for them, when a person knows deep down that they are loved, then they can be transformed. Now any individual person at any given time may be so weighed down by sorrow, may be so traumatized by an abusive childhood, so overwhelmed by the circumstances of life, that they may not be able to fully experience God’s love. They may not be *able* to respond out of the love God has for them. But every experience of God’s love moves the needle a little, pushes them a little closer to being the person God wants them to be. So I think that when Jesus commands us to love our enemy, I think he means *want the best for our enemy* and that is because if that enemy truly experiences the best, truly experiences God’s love for them, they are given another chance at life in God’s beloved community.

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OK. That’s really all I have to say. But since I’ve only been talking for ten minutes or so, let me share a couple of neat videos with you. I believe strongly in the goodness of human beings. We are naturally good. What I’m going to show you is from the [toddler experiment on altruism](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aHY3m4c8aWE), that many of you have probably seen. This experiment was first done in the early 1970s and in the fifty years since, it’s been repeated many times with many different ways of doing it, all over the world, in many different cultures, but it rather conclusively demonstrates that toddlers want to help other people even when there is no external reward. Helping another person is reward enough.

In this first episode (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-eU5xZW7cU>), the toddler has previously seen the experimenter put books into the open cabinet, but now as the video begins, when the experimenter goes to put the books away, the cabinet doors are closed.

This second episode is initially a little confusing since the experimenter is first seen in a split screen and then we see him in the main screen, but he is just putting up some cloth with a clothespin and then drops the clothes pin.

In the third episode, the experimenter is trying unsuccessfully to stack plastic blocks.

And finally in the last episode, the toddler has previously been shown that there is a front door to the box. The experimenter drops a spoon into a hole in the top of the box and tries unsuccessfully to reach the spoon through the top hole. The toddler responds.

 And I think I’ll let the toddlers have the last word.

Amen.