

Love Your Enemy

Matt. 5:43-48

After offering an interpretation of "Turn the other cheek" that understands Jesus guiding us to take a position that will free us from fear of threats and intimidation, and seeing the word that if someone takes your tunic, let him have your cloak also as very similar word, we see Jesus teaching a people living under a ruthless military occupation ways of coping and maintaining their human dignity in the worst of circumstances. Going the extra mile also reverses the position of one who is oppressed and coerced into one who exercises his own will volitionally in a ways that frees his spirit from bitterness and resentment. Giving to him who asks you is a word that threatens our sense of independence and calls for the submission of our entire will to God. God is good and He is good to me. He is able to direct me to give to others while He also meets my every need. The call to give to him who asks will require a deeper level of surrender and a sensitivity to God's specific direction while it also will be a direct challenge to the universal struggles that people have with materialism and greed.

The next word from Jesus was "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy' but I say unto you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you..." This is again a difficult word and the first obstacle to hearing Jesus here is our ability to be honest with ourselves. This word is so familiar that it has become part of how we define ourselves as Christians. Jesus told us to love our enemies and so of course, we do. Even though we may never have thought about what this would mean or look like. So, we love our enemies without knowing who they are or what this love might require of us.

So, who is your enemy?

There is a great controversy now about the Russians and what they did or didn't do in our last election. Are the Russians your enemy?

In the YMCA basketball league, I am coaching Lizzy's team. The rival coach whose team we haven't beaten yet is coach Harry. Is coach Harry my enemy?

Your neighbor is grouchy and she lets her dog mess on your front yard. Is your neighbor your enemy?

Your boss seems to have it in for you and you really feel that he is doing everything he can to set you up so he can fire you, Is your boss your enemy?

Maybe you don't have any enemies and so when Jesus said, "Love your enemies..." you are actually left with nothing to worry about you can love everybody since you have no enemies - No sweat!

Actually, the term, "enemy" is kind of a pejorative. We don't want to say that someone is our enemy - it sounds like a hateful sort of thing to say. Good Christians don't talk like that.

I want you to think of the term enemy in a functional sense. Because of the pejorative association of the word we should also find a substitute for the word itself. My adversary is someone who in a moment of time takes a position or assumes an attitude toward me that does not have my best interest in mind. Their actions have the potential to bring some harm to me. The potential harm could be large or small, just the fact that this person is taking some action that may harm me makes them functionally my adversary. We can also think in terms of the intent of the person doing harm. An action might be taken on purpose with a clear understanding of how it might harm me in effect harming me purposefully with the intent to do just that. An action might be taken on purpose but without thought about the possible unintended consequences. I might be harmed unintentionally. An action could be taken without forethought that results in harm to others. I might be harmed accidentally.

Jesus distinguished between the kinds of harm represented by adversaries. He called them enemies, those who curse you, those who hate you, and those who spitefully use you, and those who persecute you. There are degrees of harm represented in Jesus' list. Someone who curses you speaks harm toward you. Someone who persecutes you carries out a series of actions that are intended to

punish you for being who you are. We are in harmony with the principle of Jesus' teaching when we define the extent and nature of the harm that is directed toward us and the degrees of responsibility of those who carry these things out.

When a person is responsible for harming me, knowing that there are different degrees of responsibility, the person who has harmed me has functionally become an adversary and thus, one who Jesus has taught me to love. To identify a person as an adversary is then not a negative designation. My adversary becomes a person who I must give particular attention to. Of all the people in the world who need love, I must be sure that my adversary receives specific attention from me.

Notice the specific actions that Jesus gave to us: love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. If you take these actions specifically toward your adversaries then you will conform to the example of your heavenly Father "makes His sun rise on the

evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." In other words, since it is in God to give the gifts of sunshine and rain He gives them indiscriminately to all without regard for whether these blessings are deserved. Therefore as His children where it is in us to give the gifts of love, blessing, good works and prayer we should then give them indiscriminately to all, with particular attention to those we might naturally leave out, namely our adversaries. Jesus follows up by giving two additional thoughts. If we only love those who return our love, how would that distinguish us from those who do not know the Lord? If we only greet those who are close to us are we any different than anyone else? Why did Jesus use these two examples? Actually, if you say, I love you Johnny, I'll do anything for you then you're probably safe. But if you say, I love you Johnny and I know you're moving and you know I have a truck and I can help, will you be starting this Saturday? Now your love will probably cost you some time and effort. When you really greet someone you make an emotional connection. You express genuine interest in them. So Jesus tells us to distinguish ourselves as the children of God by loving through acts of service that can be accepted and by making emotional connections that express genuine interest and we are to specifically direct these acts toward those who have harmed us.