

Love Your Enemy • Matthew 5:43-47

Jennifer Thompson was a 22-year old North Carolina college student described as “the perfect student, perfect daughter, perfect homecoming queen.” But her life was forever changed one summer night when an assailant held a knife to her throat and viciously raped her.

Jennifer resolved that she would remember every detail of his appearance so she could identify her enemy and guarantee his imprisonment for the rest of his life. She tricked him into turning the light on and memorized every feature. She amazed the police with her thoroughness as the composite picture was developed. She knew everything about him. When they presented a lineup, she quickly and decisively chose Ronald Cotton as her assailant. She was calm and confident. The police described her as a perfect witness as this white woman testified against this black man. Although he insisted on his innocence the power of Jennifer’s eyewitness testimony helped to convict him and sentence him to life in prison. She never had a doubt.

A year after his conviction Ronald Cotton met another inmate in the prison kitchen. His name was Bobby Poole and they looked a lot alike. Poole was serving consecutive life sentences for a series of rapes. He bragged to other inmates that Ronald Cotton was serving his time because he had assaulted Jennifer Thompson. Cotton got a knife to murder Poole but his father told him not to murder Poole but to put his faith in God. He followed his father’s advice.

A new trial was ordered for Ronald Cotton. This time the jury saw both men. This time they heard the other side of the story. And again they convicted him on the basis of Jennifer Thompson’s eyewitness testimony. Again Ronald Cotton was sentenced to serve the rest of his life in prison.

Eleven more years passed. Jennifer Thompson had gone on with her life. She moved to Winston-Salem, married and had a family. Then one day there was an unexpected knock at her door and she saw a man that she had not seen for

a very long time. It was the police detective who had originally investigated the case. When she opened the door he said, “Jennifer, you were wrong. The new technology of DNA evidence conclusively proved that Ronald Cotton was innocent. Your assailant was Bobby Poole after all.”

Jennifer Thompson was shocked. How could she have made such a terrible mistake? She had stolen eleven years of a man’s life that could never be given back. She agonized over this every day for two years and then asked to meet with Ronald Cotton to ask for his forgiveness. She prayed for strength to meet the man. They met in a church building in the town where she had been raped. Her husband and the pastor waited outside.

Face-to-face for the first time outside a courtroom Jennifer said, “I’m sorry. If I spent every day for the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn’t come close to what I feel.” Calmly and quietly Ronald Cotton finally spoke,

Who are the hardest people in your life to love?

“I’m not mad at you. I’ve never been mad at you. I just want you to have a good life.”

They talked for two hours while the pastor and Jennifer’s husband anxiously waited outside. When they finally came out and it was time to say good-bye, Jennifer Thompson and Ronald Cotton embraced. They held each other for a long time.

A few days later Jennifer wrote to Bobby Poole in prison. She asked to meet him. She wrote, “I faced you with courage and bravery that July night. You never asked my permission. Now I ask you to face me.” She wanted to meet him so that she could forgive him. She reasoned that if Ronald Cotton could forgive her then she could forgive Bobby Poole. He never responded. Poole died of cancer while in prison early in 2000.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:43-47:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the

good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

Jesus recognized that hating our enemies is a common and natural thing to do when he voiced the popular thought, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Some of us have more enemies than others of us. Enemies come from the circumstances of life and from the choices of life. Circumstances may be beyond our control. We are assaulted, cheated, abused, hated or disliked. It may be because of the color of our skin, the job we hold, some prejudice against us, war around us or simply from being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Choices are within our control. No one can be our enemy unless we choose for them to be our enemy. Someone else may label us as the enemy, but no one can be our enemy without our consent.

Some of us have many enemies because we allow just about anybody to get on the list. Our enemies include anyone who disagrees with us politically, religiously or personally. The enemy is anyone who does what we don't like. The threshold for "enemy-hood" is low.

Recently I was on a flight from Minneapolis to Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The passenger in the window seat arrived at the last minute and there wasn't sufficient room for any of his multiple pieces of carry-on luggage in the overhead storage bins. He took it all to his seat but it was too much to fit under the seat in front of him so he asked to put his luggage under the seat in front of me. I was early. My legs are long. He suddenly started to look and sound like the enemy. His behavior was to inconvenience and discomfort me. Then I decided to lighten-up. He wasn't the enemy; he was a fellow-traveler. His luggage in my space really wasn't all that bad. He didn't need to be on my enemy list.

So who might our enemies be? Our enemies may be competitors in sports, in business, in romance, in law, in religion, in our professions or in politics. Enemies are sometimes strangers we

come in contact with in war, gender, culture or race. Often our enemies are neighbors who invade our space, make our lives difficult, disturb our peace or offend our preferences. Enemies may be assailants who harm our families, steal our possessions, take away our rights or assault our bodies. But the vast majority of our enemies are those we know best: parents; children; brothers; sisters; friends; co-workers; bosses; employees. They are people who touch our lives in divorces and lawsuits and custody battles and broken contracts and offensive words. They're the people to whom we don't speak or with whom we get even or with whom we have animosity, anger and hurt.

According to Jesus, "*You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'*" So whom do you hate? Who is your enemy? Who are the hardest people in your life to love? Who would you rather not forgive? If those who know you best were asked who is the enemy you hate, what would they say?

Jesus called Christians to absolutely radical behavior. It may be the most revolutionary teaching of any religion or religious leader in human history. It distinguishes Christians from non-Christians as much or more than anything else we do. Jesus said, "*Love your enemies.*"

Of course, there are different types of love. Jesus is not expecting us to have the same emotional affection for a murderer as for our mother. He is not suggesting we have an emotional attachment toward a molester that is in any way similar to our love for the molested child.

Love of family and friends comes mostly from the heart. It's almost impossible not to love our own baby. We talk about "falling in love" with a future husband or wife. But love for our enemies comes more from the will than from the heart. We choose to love someone our hearts don't even like. Loving our enemies is deliberately choosing against bitterness and for benevolence. It is doing the supernatural rather than the natural. To love our enemies means choosing the highest possible good for them even when we have received the worse possible harm from them. Sometimes it may need to be a tough love, but it is always seeking whatever is best, even for our enemy.

Jesus explained how to do this amazing Christian love:

#1.) Pray for those who persecute you.

Every day, pray and ask God for the very best in the life of your enemy. At first it may be the hardest thing you've ever done. Eventually it may be one of the best things you've ever done.

#2.) Behave like God's child. Jesus invited us to love our enemies so that we may be the sons and daughters of our Father in heaven. Our love comes from belonging to the family of God. We refuse to be controlled by the behavior of our enemies. We behave like Jesus who forgave and prayed for his executioners while they were hammering the spikes into his hands and feet.

#3.) Follow God's example. Jesus explained that God "*causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*" Theologians call this "common grace". God gives good blessings every day to the bad guys and the good guys, to his enemies and his friends. Jesus invites us to be good, kind and loving every day to everyone, even our enemies.

#4.) Get God's reward. Jesus asked, "*If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?*" There are special rewards from God for Christians who love their enemies. It is a matter of faith. If we do good to our enemies God will bless and reward us in the end. We live for God's reward instead of getting even with our enemies.

#5.) Be different from non-Christians. Jesus points out that the worst of people love those they like. Even pagans love their family and friends. But Christians are different. We are not controlled by bad people or by our enemies. God himself controls us because he lives in our hearts. We are different. We are Christians. We

love our enemies.

Nelson Mandela spent most of his life in a South African prison under the racism of apartheid. In one of the most amazing transformations in history he was not only set free but he became the President of South Africa. Heads of state from around the globe attended his inauguration, vying for the front row seats of

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honor. Do you know whom Nelson Mandela invited to sit in those seats? He invited his prison guards.

Jesus said, "*Love your enemies.*" It is a Christian choice to which Jesus Christ supernaturally invites us.

Who are your enemies? How will you love them?

Our God, without your help, this would be impossible. But it is possible through Jesus Christ who loved us, through your Holy Spirit inside of us, through the supernatural power that you give to us from heaven.

Lord, may these be more than words from an ancient document. May these be the realities of the life that we live, that we love our enemies—for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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