

Enemies – the Best Test of Faith

Probably the best known South African in the world, probably in all of history, is Nelson Mandela. Educated as an attorney, he fought against apartheid and sought to get justice for his fellow black countrymen. As a result of that, he was imprisoned from 1964 to 1990 and then after his release, to the amazement of the world, profound changes began to take place until in 1993 he shared the Nobel Prize for Peace with former South African President F. W. de Klerk. A new constitution was adopted giving a vote to everyone, ending apartheid. The candidate from the African National Congress was Nelson Mandela and he was elected President of South Africa.

Do you know who he invited to sit in the front row as honored guests at his inauguration? His former wardens and jailers from his years in prison. Nelson Mandela followed the words of Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount:

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? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

One Bible scholar claims that there is no passage in the New Testament which contains such a concentrated expression of the Christian ethic of personal relations as this passage does.¹

When Jesus said, “Love your enemies,” there could be no doubt that he spoke some of

the most wonderful words that he ever said and surely among the most difficult that he ever said. For enemies can be counted among life’s most important relationships. In fact, there are some people who have all of life defined by and revolving around their enemies. But before we can talk about loving them, we need to first identify who our enemies are.

Some might say an enemy is simply an adversary — it’s someone who is on the opposite side of the issue. It is like an enemy soldier in a battle. Or in our adversarial system of courts, it’s the person who is at the other bench in the lawsuit – the one who is doing the suing or the one who is being sued. It is the person of the opposite political party or of a different religion. It’s someone who is against what I am for, someone who is determined he will win and the only way he can win is for me to lose.

An enemy may be defined as a persecutor. This is a person who tries to make life miserable for you. He isn’t so much after his pleasure as he is after your pain. Actually, sometimes an adversary and a persecutor may be precisely the same person who not only wants to win the lawsuit but wants to make you mis-

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erable in the process. He not only seeks full custody of the children, but he delights in using

his power and money to make you feel weak and helpless.

Or the enemy may be defined as a hater. The hate may have been caused by something you did or may have been totally generated by the other person alone. Hate may be rooted in revenge with a desire to get even. This is the enemy who was hurt or rejected and felt the pain so deeply that he or she now lives to inflict pain on you. Sometimes a hatred is routed in prejudice. It’s not so much about the individual, but is a pre-judging of that individual

because of race or ethnic background or because of age.

An enemy may be someone in just about any one of life's categories. An enemy is that former husband or wife who hurt you deeply and continues to cause pain. An enemy is a neighbor who spreads vicious gossip that undermines relationships with just about everyone that is in the community. An enemy is the criminal, the person who invaded your home, stole your possessions, assaulted your body. An enemy is the employer who made promises and then after you counted upon those promises and made all of your plans, the promises were withdrawn and broken. An enemy may be a church where you were treated un-Christianly. It can be a lawyer who manipulated the case with inaccurate information, told lies in order to win. Or a judge who is supposed to uphold and pursue justice, but who treated you unjustly. It's the lender who refused you the credit she should have given and foreclosed on your home when it really wasn't necessary. It may be the relative who treats you with disdain or maybe the man who molested you and took away your innocence and left scars to remain for a lifetime. An enemy can even be a son or daughter — someone you've loved with all of your heart, only to be betrayed and humiliated. Or a salesperson who mistreated you or a physician who was in such a hurry you were misdiagnosed and maybe even mistreated.

Who did I forget? If you were making a list, who would come to your mind? If there is an enemy you would be perfectly justified in hating, who would that enemy be? Not "Public Enemy Number One" but "Personal Enemy Number One." Who could be, who would be or should be your enemy?

Whomever that person is, Jesus says in what surely has to be one of his most difficult sayings, "Love your enemy." What does he mean

by that? Isn't that asking a little too much? You need to realize that the words of Jesus were written in a language of long ago where, unlike our English, there were multiple words for love. So the Greeks used the word *storge* to refer to family love such as between parent and child. *Eros* was a different word to describe the passion between a man and a woman. *Philia* was the warm tender affection between two friends. *Agape* was the word for unconquerable good will towards someone else — doing everything in the other person's best interest.

Jesus was not telling us that we need to love our enemies the same way we love members of our own family. He is not proposing that you have the same love toward a rapist as you have toward the mother who nurtured you or that you love a belligerent boss the same way you love your newborn child. When Jesus used *agape* in saying "Love your enemies", he was not talking so much about the feeling of the heart as he was speaking about an act of the will. It's not what we feel toward the other person; it's what we do toward that other person. He did not ask us as Christians to like our enemies but to always act in a way that is good for others regardless of how they have behaved toward us.

If Jesus were the teacher and he were to speak these words of the Sermon on the Mount to us today, invariably there would be those of us, probably most of us, who would raise our

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hands and wave for his attention and say, "How do you do that? It's a nice principle, but can you give us an example?" Jesus says, "Well, prayer is an example." You can pray

for those who persecute you. Try asking for God's good and God's best for the person who is number one on your enemy list — the person who has hurt you the most. You can hear 10,000 testimonials of those who'll say that it is very difficult to continue hating those for

whom we pray.

Generosity is another example of how to love your enemies, Jesus would say. Take God's example. Have you ever noticed that while there are some people who love him wholeheartedly, there are other people who hate him diligently; yet he is equally generous to both? God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the crops of the good guys and the bad guys alike. He is the God who is generous even to his enemies.

Add to the list, kindness. In the New Testament in Romans 12:20 we are told:

If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

Good will and good behavior towards someone else is a very God-like thing to do and as Christians we are to be like God. After all, a person doesn't need to be a Christian to be nice to someone who is nice. Anybody can love a lovable person. The best test and the best evidence of being a Christian is to behave in a way that is not only like Jesus Christ but to behave in a way in which we might not otherwise behave if we were not Christians. And that means loving our enemies.

There is a very important point that must be made here. Loving an enemy does not mean always doing what that enemy wants. It does not mean caving in or complying to the other person's desires. In fact, sometimes it requires tough love that disciplines, that confronts, that even punishes, but always for the good of the other person. It's never vengeful. It's never to get even. It is not about revenge. Loving your enemy is doing whatever is required to treat that enemy the way God would treat that enemy. It means doing whatever is in that person's best interest, protecting them from wrong, sometimes even protecting them from themselves. It's a love that forgives people, even when they don't ask to be forgiven. It's the kind of love toward an enemy that helps the other person. It's the love that always works

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hard for God's greatest good in a person's life.

The best way to love enemies is to treat them the way God treats them. As if it were not difficult enough when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he finishes his point in the Sermon on the Mount with words that are so mind boggling that we are tempted to give up trying. Jesus says, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." I don't know about you, but I am so far from perfect that it is a totally unreasonable goal!

Try and understand that what Jesus meant by "perfect" may not be what we first think it to mean. This is not an expectation that we be exactly like God in everything we say and do, but rather it means that we behave in the way that we were designed to behave. God is perfect and God does what God is supposed to do. Jesus encourages us to do what Christians are supposed to do.

Suppose you go out for a run this afternoon. The forecast is for sunshine and temperatures in the 80's. On your way back, you're hot and panting and slow down to a walk. You walk past the front yard of a neighbor and there she sits out in the yard smiling. (Have you ever noticed that the people that sit on lawn chairs are always smiling, but the people who run never smile? There is something significant

about that!) As you go by, you are so desperately thirsty that you stop and ask her for something to drink.

She says, "Sure, just let me go inside and get you some bottled water." You say, "That would be perfect!" Now, by that you don't mean that the water is scientifically tested as free of all impurities. You are saying that it will do exactly what you need to have done and that is to quench your thirst. The water does what it's supposed to do.

Jesus does not ask us to be God; he asks us to be Christians who are God-like. This means that we give love to those who don't deserve it

because we've been changed by God. It means that we demonstrate an outrageous grace to other people because we've experienced the outrageous grace of God ourselves.

I know this from experience because before I ever thought about loving God, he loved me passionately. When I have kicked dirt in his face, he has been gracious and kind in response. There are times when I have done stupid and sinful things and then have asked God for forgiveness only to sheepishly return and say once more, "God, I wasn't going to do this again, but this is the last time. Please forgive me!" And he forgives me. Then all too soon, I'm back again, saying, "God, this is embarrassing, but would you forgive me again?"

He forgives again and again — far beyond what anyone would reasonably expect because he is a God of outrageous grace. And he is asking us to treat our enemies and those who hate us the same way. God wants us to show our enemies undeserved love and to treat them with an outrageous grace.

Let me tell you a true story. It's about a man named Steve who was a Christian. In fact, he was a very outspoken Christian. So much so that whenever he had an opportunity to talk about Jesus Christ he would literally preach a sermon to any audience he could gather.

One day it seems that he went too far and the group of men that were listening to him became angry and started shouting and yelling vicious things at him. The yelling turned to violence and some of them grabbed him and started to rough him up. Then, what started out as a group became a mob. Someone picked up a rock and hit Steve in the head and he began to hemorrhage. You would think that the others would be frightened off but they just became more blood thirsty and continued to throw more stones until he was bleeding so profusely he could barely be recognized.

Steve fell to his knees realizing that no one was going to rescue him. He was going to die there. And so he began to pray. He said the most

astonishing thing. His plea to God was that God would forgive these men for what they were doing.

In that group was a guy named Saul. Long afterward he could not get Steve out of his mind. He could see the blood streaming down, but more than that he could hear the words that Steve had said. They echoed over and over and so profoundly affected him that one day he, too, decided to become a Christian. And when he did, Saul changed his name to Paul. Here in Minnesota our capital city is named after him. We call him Saint Paul. Augustine, the great church leader, said, "The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen."²

It's a true story, you can read it for yourself in the New Testament in Acts chapter 7. There you will find that Steve died loving his enemies even though he never knew the end of the story. He never knew that one of his enemies would become the greatest missionary who ever lived and the author of much of the New Testament.

You have heard people who have said, "Love your neighbor, but hate your enemy." Jesus tells us: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be the sons and daughters of your Father in heaven."

¹ William Barclay, Matthew, page 171.

² William Barclay, Romans, page 168.

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