

Question: I know Jesus said to love our enemies, but do you really think this is possible?

Even the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” sounds idealistic in this fallen world, but the concept of loving an enemy really does seem impossible. The bitterness and resentment we feel toward enemies make it difficult for us to imagine that even God could love them. Yet, the Bible demonstrates that God loved us when we were still his enemies (Romans 5:6-9); and Jesus prayed for those who crucified him (Luke 23:34). Jesus has not asked something of us that he was unwilling to do himself.

The place to begin learning to love one another and our enemies is by understanding that the love of which Jesus spoke is more than a warm feeling toward those we like. The love of which Jesus spoke is an intentional decision to act towards others in ways we want them to act toward us. I see no evidence that Jesus demanded that we feel good about the life and actions of our enemies, but he was calling for us to break the cycle of hatred and violence by acting in loving ways toward them. Feelings tend to follow behavior. By making the decision to love an enemy, we can change the way we see that person. Sometimes such loving actions toward an enemy can change an enemy into a friend over time.

Also, we need to realize that we must first receive love in order to be able to give love. The apostle of love wrote, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). For example, a sinful woman once entered the house where Jesus was, wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Upon seeing the critical attitude of his host toward this woman, Jesus told a parable of two men, one who owed five-hundred denarii and the other fifty. Since neither of them had the money to repay him, the moneylender canceled both debts. Then Jesus asked his listeners, “Now which of them will love him more?” He stated that the correct answer was the one who was forgiven the most. Of the sinful woman, Jesus said, “Her many sins have been forgiven-- for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47).

Therefore, learning to love our enemies begins with learning what it means to be loved by God in our sinfulness and unworthiness. Only when we are humble enough to admit the seriousness of our sins against God—sins so great that only the death of God’s Son could atone for them—can we begin to learn what it means

to receive God's forgiving love. Because of this experience of receiving unconditional love from God, we can find the power to turn and extend love and forgiveness toward our enemies, too.

The alternative to loving our enemies brings tragedy. We can reject the forgiving love of God toward us and deny ourselves the hope of eternal life with God. We can live in bitterness and hatred toward our enemies, but this only creates an overwhelming unhappiness that continues all of our lives. We will never escape the horror of hatred. To love an enemy may be the most difficult command to obey, but the rewards are eternal. Loving an enemy is hard to do. But with the strength which comes from God's love, we can begin to grow toward this goal.

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