

How To Love Our Enemies. Dr. Amanda Udis-Kessler. Progressive Spirit 11/06/25

Pastor Caitlin Trussell once said, “I’m pretty sure when Jesus said, ‘love your enemies,’ he didn’t mean kill them.” I’ve been thinking about this quote since the Charlie Kirk shooting. I have no doubt that Charlie Kirk was my enemy, based on the things he said and did. But what should my response to him have been? What should any of us do about our enemies – beyond not killing them?

Well, that’s easy. According to Jesus, we should love them. Sounds simple, right? But it’s so, so hard! It may be the hardest thing we ever try to do. That said, there are ways to love our enemies that we don’t articulate often enough, so I’m going to propose some concrete steps we can take along these lines. This approach starts with our actions, not our emotions, and then moves on to the psychological and spiritual work we can do to love our enemies more fully. Specifically, we are called to change our actions, change our minds, and then change our hearts. Here, I’ll talk mostly about changing our actions and begin to suggest what changing our minds might look like.

First, though, it’s crucial to say what loving our enemies does not mean, because this may be where many of us get tangled up. From within a dualistic, zero-sum, scarcity-driven mindset, we may feel that loving our enemies would require us to support their agendas, believe what they say about us, or roll over and let them harm us or strip our rights away. From such a perspective, we may think that we cannot love our enemies while struggling against their harmful actions. We may even think that if we love our enemies, we are not allowed to see them as our enemies.

None of that is true.

We can love our enemies while opposing their actions, rejecting the lies they tell about us, and working for our rights and dignity. We can name our enemies as our enemies and still love them. In fact, **loving our enemies requires us to oppose their actions and hold them accountable for the harm they cause** – a point to which I will return.

What, then, does loving our enemies demand of us? I find a clue in Jesus’s instruction to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us “so that you may be children of your Parent in heaven [who] makes [the] sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45; inclusive language added; NRSVUE). God, as described here, enables both the moral and the immoral to flourish, providing humanity with the sun and rain we all need, regardless of our goodness or lack thereof.

I can’t make the sun rise or the rain fall, not on anyone, let alone on everyone, and certainly not dispassionately, regardless of someone’s kindness or cruelty. **But I can work for the**

good of all people and strive to help all people flourish. Such work is, I think, the human equivalent of what God does according to Jesus in this passage.

Working for the good of all people matters because my enemies and I share a common humanity. I've written in detail about what this means in my book *Abundant Lives: A Progressive Christian Ethic of Flourishing*, but in the interests of space, I'll stick to just a single universal human attribute here: embodiment.

All people are embodied, meaning that all of us need access to the same survival resources (food, water, clean air, clothing, shelter, etc.) to thrive in our bodies. Both my friends and my enemies need access to comprehensive, affordable, quality healthcare to flourish. Those I know and those I don't all need freedom from violence, war, physical harm, and assault to have a chance of embodied well-being. And, of course, friend and foe need the same access to bodily autonomy as I do if we are to be able to use our bodies to make good lives for ourselves and others.

The implications of this simple point are breathtaking when it comes to loving our enemies. **Whenever I work for economic justice and against hunger or homelessness, that's loving my enemies. As is striving to make the world less violent in any of the hundred ways it's violent. As is raising the alarm against unsafe workplaces, unsafe food or products, or medical malpractice. As is advocating for universal healthcare. As is supporting bodily autonomy for all people as long as that autonomy is not used to harm others.** (And as are all the actions that support human flourishing beyond our embodiment: as emotional beings, meaning-making beings, and so on.)

I am called to desire and work concretely for the flourishing of my enemies, just as I desire and work for the flourishing of all other people. I am called to put some of my time, energy, and resources toward being sure that my enemies have access to the same preconditions of flourishing that I need and that everyone needs. In this sense, I am called to love my enemies as myself, however I feel about them. (And if I'm not ready to desire good things for my enemies, I'm still called to work for those good things for them.)

Moreover, since people are moral (and sometimes immoral) beings, I can work for the moral flourishing of my enemies by pursuing justice for those my enemies have harmed and by holding my enemies accountable for the harm they have caused. Pursuing justice is a way of loving people we will never meet – both my enemies and those my enemies have caused to suffer.

In fact, **to the extent that loving people requires us to work for their well-being, and to the extent that moral well-being matters, I must resist my enemies in order to love them.** I must resist their assumptions and agendas when those assumptions and agendas block flourishing and cause suffering for anyone – me or anyone else. My enemies are not flourishing morally when they harm people. Therefore, I am called to invite my enemies to

repent of the harm they cause and to demand that they stop causing it. Holding my enemies accountable is part of loving them.

There are, of course, punitive, judgmental ways of holding people accountable for their actions that result in excluding them from the moral community to which we see all good people as belonging. If I morally exclude my enemies, however, I will be fine with treating them unfairly, and it won't bother me if they suffer or fail to flourish. That is not an acceptable outcome. Therefore, it's crucial that I continue to understand my enemies as part of my moral community, to refuse to morally exclude them, even as I hold them accountable for the damage they do.

This approach to loving enemies calls for deep mental, psychological, and spiritual work to buttress it. I can't discuss most of that work here, but I want to end by saying something about how **we must repent (in the sense of changing our minds about our enemies) in order to love them.**

The most important component of our repentance is moving past that zero-sum, scarcity-driven mentality that says it has to be us or them, that we cannot all flourish, that there is not enough abundance for everyone. As seductive as this way of thinking is, as deeply as we have been taught it, and as profoundly as our society is built on it, Jesus taught something else: that God makes the sun rise and the rain fall on everyone. God provides sufficient abundance for everyone. To be God's children, we must do the same.

I don't need to want my enemies to flourish at my expense, but neither should I want to flourish at their expense. My well-being should not require my enemies to suffer; my enemies' well-being should not require me to suffer. Is this counterintuitive? Of course. It's not the world we live in. But it's the Kin-dom to which Jesus invited us – a Kin-dom in which our hopes and dreams are greater than our enemies' fears, and in which, at some point, none of us will either have or be enemies. If that Kin-dom is God's will for us (however we understand God), then working toward that day is part of Jesus's call on us.

So, we may come to love our enemies by helping them flourish. In so doing, may we become children of the One who makes the sun rise and the rain fall on everyone. May the blessings we offer the world – and our enemies – nourish and heal even as the sun warms us and the rain eases our thirst. And may we bring about a day in which no one kills their enemies because there no enemies left, only co-conspirators building the Beloved Community.

~ Dr. Amanda Udis-Kessler

About the Author

Dr. Amanda Udis-Kessler is a sociologist and the author of three books, including 2024's "Abundant Lives: A Progressive Christian Ethic of Flourishing" (Pilgrim Press) as well as a major contributor to the 2023 anthology "A Liturgy for All Bodies: New Words for a New

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