



Sermons from the Greats II



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Loving Those We'd Rather Avoid
In the Spirit of Martin Luther King Jr.
Matt. 5:43-48

By Pastor Paul Hudson
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This is the last sermon in our series, Sermons from the Greats. Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and I thought a great way to honor his life and legacy would be to bring one of his sermons to you this morning. However, I found that MLKJR's speeches and sermons are still held under strict copyright by the King Estate with no provision for churches, and I was unable to get permission to use the sermon I had planned. So, instead, I wrote a sermon that is inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermon titled "Loving Your Enemies," a message he preached in late 1957 at his own church, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. This sermon is titled, "Loving Those We'd Rather Avoid." I've peppered in a few quotes and excerpts directly from MLKJR.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was an American Baptist minister, a great civil rights leader, and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. His passionate advocacy for justice, equality, and nonviolent resistance led the transformation of the United States during the Civil Rights Movement. Through his Christian convictions, he led pivotal campaigns to challenge segregation and racial injustice. His leadership was instrumental in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Though his life was tragically cut short, King's legacy continues to inspire movements for justice and peace around the world.

The message this morning is in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy.

Let's open to the passage this morning, Matthew 5:43-48

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. '44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children 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. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Mt 5:43-48.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Let's pray.

Jesus, our Lord and Master, turned to his disciples and said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." These are hard words from the Lord; they come with force. Yes, Jesus is talking about love, and we often associate love with comfort and beauty, but these words are not meant to comfort us; they are meant to propel us into a new reality forcefully.

Straight from the mouth of Jesus, these clear words carry a weight of responsibility. The truth is this may be the hardest command ever spoken by Jesus. You see, loving our enemies runs against our nature. It's anti-culture. It goes against our natural impulse for self-preservation, vengeance, and winning. When we are wronged, our nature tells us to defend ourselves, to retaliate, to cut off, to cancel, to count the wrongs, and to hold it against them.

But here is Jesus looking into our souls and saying, "Love your enemies." He didn't say tolerate your enemies. He didn't say ignore them. He didn't say hope for their demise. He didn't say ask the Lord to avenge you. No, he said, "love them!"

Jesus Knows This Is Hard

Jesus knew these were not comforting words; he knew this was hard- the hardest thing you'll ever do. Jesus knows all about enemies- he knows what they're capable of. He especially knows all about persecution, betrayal, false accusation, injustice, and all the pain that comes with that. Jesus would not give a hard command that he would not experience himself. He knew what was coming. He knew he would be mocked, flogged, left alone, and hung on a cross to die completely alone- even forsaken in those moments by Father God.

So, the command of Jesus to love your enemies is spoken with a full awareness of what it takes- a full awareness of the sacrifice. This kind of love is not sentimental. It isn't passive. It is a sacrifice, and it is courageous.

As followers of Christ, we all must wrestle with what this means.

The First Work Is Inner Work

So, how do we love our enemies? If we want to know how to love our enemies, we must begin by looking at ourselves, not others. The first step is self-examination. Looking at what might be inside our own hearts that provokes a hateful response in others.

Now, it's true that some people are simply going to dislike us because of something out of our control. They might fear something about us or hate the color of our skin. They might misunderstand us, or simply hate a certain physical feature we have, or our way of life. Some people will hate us simply because we exist. And there's nothing you can do about that except pray for the person and love them.

Jesus calls us beyond that, though. Sometimes relationships fall apart, and hate forms in a person's heart because of something you've done to them or maybe didn't do for them. And when you examine yourself, maybe you've realized you forgot about a situation that caused hate and hurt in another person. Or maybe you minimized it, justified it, and all the while the offended one was left to fester in hatred or dislike for you.

As time passed, your memory might have faded, but time doesn't always heal the wounds in those we have offended. Jesus asked, "How is it that you can see the speck in your brother's eye while ignoring the plank in your own eye?" So, we must look at ourselves first if we are to let love flow to our enemies. We must look at ourselves with humility and reality, and this takes courage. It is saying, "Lord, search me. Reveal anything in me that results in brokenness rather than healing."

So, in loving our enemies and those who hate us, we start by looking at ourselves.

Refuse to Reduce People

Self-examination is just the start. The second thing we must do is look outward with new eyes. We must look at our enemy and refuse to reduce them to their worst moment, or worst behavior, and instead, see the worth within them. Every person who has ever hurt us, fought us, or spoken badly about us has a beauty inside that is worth more than the harm they caused. That beauty is the image of God. All humans were created in the image of God. That image may be marred, covered up, or blurred, but it cannot be erased of its worth.

There is worth mixed with evil in every human heart. There is brokenness in the best of us. Dignity rests within even our worst enemy. If we ignore the worth in every human, we justify cruelty when they become our enemy.

When we remember their worth, the door to love opens. It's not an easy door to walk through, but the door opens. And this must be noted— loving our enemies is not about excusing injustice or denying harm. It isn't about excusing horrific abuses. But it means that you refuse to surrender your view of humanity to bitterness.

What Kind of Love Does Jesus Mean?

Now let's think about what Jesus means here. Jesus did not say, "Like your enemies." He goes beyond like. The love that Jesus teaches is something far beyond like.

Here, we can turn to the Greek language for understanding. The Greek language has three words for love. The first word is Eros. Eros comes as a beautiful but romantic kind of love. It's the kind of love you feel when you're attracted to someone, and you pour out your love on them. The second Greek word for love is Philia. This kind of love is also beautiful, but it is more about affection between two friends. It's a brotherly kind of love. You like a person, and they like you back. You love a person, and they love you back. Not in any romantic way, but as friends who love each other.

The third Greek word for love is Agape. Agape is deeper than Eros or Philia. I think it's appropriate to reference the very words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. right here, in talking about Agape love: Dr. King said, "Agape is something of the understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. It is a love that seeks nothing in return. It's what theologians would call the love of God working in the lives of men. And when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men, not because they are likable, but because God loves them."¹

This kind of love requires a conscious decision on your part. You must bend your will to align with it. You must choose the ultimate good for the person, even when they have not done so in return. Yes, this kind of love drops opportunities for revenge and prays instead. This kind of love blesses rather than curses. This kind of love fends off resentment.

¹ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

With this love, you oppose a person's actions while still embracing their dignity. With this kind of love, you resist injustice without joining in injustice yourself. With this kind of love, you stand firm against hate without becoming cruel yourself. That is the kind of love Jesus commands.

Why Love Instead of Hate?

Right now, you might be asking, "Why?" Why love this way? Why love someone who has harmed us? Why pray for them?

Jesus answers the question of why, not with theoretical ideals but with practical truth.

Hate Multiplies What It Touches

The practical truth is hate can never stop evil. Hate only prolongs it, even encourages it. Hate breeds hate. Retaliation invites retaliation. Violence provokes violence. Bitterness breeds bitterness. And when every injury demands repayment, the cycle never stops—it goes back and forth. For this cycle to stop, someone must step up with courage to stop it. Someone must be willing to take the last blow in the name of love. This might seem weak, but it's not. This love is a great strength.

Hate Destroys the Hater

There's another reason Jesus calls us to love our enemies: it's because hatred transforms the heart of the one who hates. Hatred distorts perception; you can't see right. Hatred trains the hater to see threats in everyone. It rewrites the sense of right and wrong. With time, hatred turns the hater to justify cruelty and shun compassion. Hatred may seem like protection, but it holds captive.

Jesus knows this. He looked at us and said, "Love your enemies," because he knows that hate is a cancer that eats away at the core of your being and your life. Love, because hate destroys both the hater and the hated.

Love Has Redemptive Power

And finally, there's a deeper reason Jesus commands us to love our enemies. It is this: love transforms. It may take time, but love redeems.

Love opens doors that pure force could never open. Love gives a place for repentance, growth, and reconciliation. It may not always bring immediate change, but sacrificial love sets the one who loves free. History has shown us again and again: power rooted in domination eventually collapses. Power rooted in sacrificial love endures.

Dr. King tells the story of Abraham Lincoln and Edwin Stanton: "When Abraham Lincoln was running for president of the United States, there was a man [Edwin Stanton] who ran all around the country talking [bad] about Lincoln. And sometimes he would get to the point that he would even talk about his looks, saying, 'You don't want a tall, lanky, ignorant man like this as the president of the United States.' He went on and on and on with that type of attitude and wrote about it. Finally, one day Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States. And he

came to the point of having to choose a Secretary of War. He looked across the nation and decided to choose Mr. Stanton. And when Abraham Lincoln stood around his advisors and mentioned this fact, they said to him, “Mr. Lincoln, are you a fool? Do you know what Mr. [Edwin M.] Stanton has been saying about you? Do you know that he has tried to defeat you on every hand? Did you read all of those derogatory statements that he made about you?” Abraham Lincoln stood before the advisors around him and said, “Oh yes, I know about it. But after looking over the country, I find that he is the best man for the job.”

Mr. Stanton did become Secretary of War, and a few months later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. And as Abraham Lincoln came to the end of his life, Stanton stood up and said: “Now he belongs to the ages.” And he made a beautiful statement concerning the character and the stature of this man. If Abraham Lincoln had hated Stanton, [he] would not have transformed and redeemed Stanton. Stanton would have gone to his grave hating Lincoln, and Lincoln would have gone to his grave hating Stanton. But through the power of love, Abraham Lincoln was able to redeem Stanton.”²

That is the power in love that our world has hardly discovered. Now think of Jesus. Jesus lived in a world ruled by fear, hierarchy, and violence. And He chose a different way—not because it was easier, but because it was the true way.

On the cross, Jesus showed compassion for those who crucified him—“Father forgive them—they know not what they do.” That prayer was a declaration that evil would not have the final say.

The Way Forward Today

My friends, this command of Jesus should not be confined to the walls of the church. It must go out into the streets, our schools, workplaces and prisons. Into broken neighborhoods, fractured and scarred by years of injustice.

The task before us this morning is not about being filled up with a beautiful love.

The task is about being bold enough to love when it’s hard, when hatred seems more reasonable. We live in a hard world that leads us to harden our hearts. Our nature tells us to draw lines in the sand, to stereotype others, and to protect our own interests by pushing away threats. In a world like this, mercy and forgiveness look weak, and love seems useless.

Yet, Jesus walks through the middle of all that noise and says, “This is the way.”

Dr. King said this about Jesus, “Yes, I can see Jesus walking around the hills and the valleys of Palestine. And I can see him looking out at the Roman Empire with all of its fascinating and intricate military machinery. But in the midst of that, I can hear him saying, “I will not use this method. Neither will I hate the Roman Empire.”

² <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

This is the way. Through the power and influence of Christ's love, he divided history between A.D. and B.C. and shook the gates off the Roman Empire. And now, every Sunday morning all around the world the chorus rings out: "All hail the power of Jesus' name." and another chorus: "Hallelujah, hallelujah! He's King of kings and Lord of lords. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" and yet another choir singing: "In Christ there is no East or West. In Him, no North or South, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world."

And as I look into the eyes of each of you, I say, "I love you." I believe—perhaps foolishly—that love still has the power to transform enemies into neighbors, wounds into wisdom, and suffering into testimony. And when we walk this way—when we love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who oppose us—we do not just obey the command of Jesus. We reveal Jesus to the hurting world around us. Then Jesus will open the gates of heaven to us and call us into his kingdom, saying, "Come in, faithful servant, you have loved just as I have loved you."Amen.

Closing Prayer

I invite you to bow your heads as we close with this prayer from Dr. King.

"Oh God, help us in our lives and in all of our attitudes, to work out this controlling force of love, this controlling power that can solve every problem that we confront in all areas. Oh, we talk about politics; we talk about the problems facing our civilization. Grant that all men will come together and discover that as we solve the crisis and solve these problems—let us join together in a great fellowship of love and bow down at the feet of Jesus. Give us this strong determination. In the name and spirit of this Christ, we pray. Amen."

Study Questions
Read Matt. 5:43-48

Observation Questions (What does the text *say*?)

1. What command does Jesus give in verse 44 that goes against common human instinct?
2. What examples does Jesus give in verses 46-47 to illustrate the difference between ordinary love and the kind of love He commands?
3. How does Jesus connect loving enemies to being "children of your Father in heaven" and being "perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" in verses 45 and 48?

Interpretation Questions (What does the text *mean*?)

1. The pastor mentioned that Jesus' command to love enemies is "the hardest command ever spoken by Jesus" and "runs against our nature." What does this suggest about the kind of transformation Jesus expects from His followers?
2. The sermon emphasized that "loving our enemies is not about excusing injustice or denying harm." How does the sermon suggest one can oppose wrongdoing and uphold dignity simultaneously when dealing with an enemy?
3. Dr. King defined Agape love as "understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men... a love that seeks nothing in return." How does this definition challenge common understandings of love, especially in the context of those who have wronged us?
4. The sermon highlighted that "hate multiplies what it touches" and "destroys the hater." What does this imply about the personal cost of holding onto hatred, even if it feels justified?

Application Questions (How should the truth *change* us?)

1. The sermon calls us to start with "honest self-examination" and look at the "plank in your own eye" before addressing others. Can you identify a recent situation where you were quick to judge or react negatively to someone, and upon reflection, you might have contributed to the tension or conflict? What specific "inner work" might God be inviting you to do in that situation?
2. The sermon challenges us to "refuse to reduce people to their worst actions" and instead see the image of God in them. Think of someone in your life who you find particularly difficult or who has wronged you. What is one specific quality or aspect of their humanity that you can intentionally choose to acknowledge this week, even if it feels hard?
3. Agape love is described as a "willful commitment to another's ultimate good." What is one practical, non-emotional action (like praying, blessing, or protecting) you could take this week towards someone you struggle to "like" but are called to love with agape?
4. The sermon states that "sacrificial love disarms power rooted in domination and creates space for repentance, transformation, and reconciliation." Is there a cycle of negativity or conflict in a relationship you are part of (family, work, community) that you feel called to break? What would it look like for you to "take the last blow in the name of love" in that situation, as the sermon suggested?

5. The story of Lincoln and Stanton illustrates how love can transform. Can you think of a relationship where you've seen the redemptive power of love at work, either in your own life or someone else's? What was a key element that allowed that transformation to happen?
6. The sermon reminds us that this command "must go out into the streets, our schools, workplaces and prisons." Beyond personal relationships, how might the principle of loving enemies shape your engagement with broader societal issues or disagreements you encounter online or in your community? What is one small step you could take to embody this public love?