Love Your Enemies

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Kill your enemies is antithetical to Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth unless, of course, we would aspire to kill our enemies with kindness. Yet, some of you might have wished Jesus said something harsh about our enemies. It would have been so much easier that way. It’s hard to love our enemies. It’s not hard to understand, it’s hard to put into practice.

In Matthew’s version of this teaching, Jesus says, “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” (Matthew 5:43). The love your neighbor and hate your enemy phrase is set off in punctuation marks in our text to express a popular quote in Jesus’ day.

Hate your enemies is strong language. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that I actually hate my enemies. As a conflict avoiding person, I prefer to ignore my enemies. You know, to snub them in a passive-aggressive sort of way.

Love your enemy is coupled with three other imperatives, in verses 27-28: “Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you.” I talked, last Sunday, about Jesus’ blessings called beatitudes that precede our morning lesson. Jesus pronounces God’s blessing on those who know their need, mourn their sin and have big appetites for God. Jesus summons his followers to follow God’s lead and bless those who curse us. Like I said, this passage isn’t hard to understand; it’s just hard to do.

Jesus supplies, in verses 29-30, four illustrations of what loving your enemy might look like in real life situations. He calls upon his followers to:
1. Turn the other cheek.
2. Give the shirt off our backs.
3. Give to those who ask.
4. Refrain from seeking repayment when goods are taken.

Let’s explore his first illustration, that of turning the other cheek.

There was a certain protocol in Jesus’ day for turning the other cheek, which could be employed in master/slave and soldier/civilian relationships. It was used to shame the recipient. It was never used to inflict pain on someone else.

It was considered improper in those days to strike someone with an open palm or fist or to hit with the left hand. If some-
one offered me his right cheek, I would strike with the back of my right hand. I’ve asked David to help me illustrate the point. Let’s image David violated our code of honor. David would stand before me and offer his right cheek and I would strike it using the back of my right hand. But what would happen if David offered his left cheek? My only recourse would be to strike with my left hand, which would be considered a humiliation and a significant loss of face in a shame-based culture.

The same principle holds if I would ask for David’s coat. But what would happen if David also offered me the shirt off his back? We’re not going to act this one out, but you can see where this is going. His nakedness would cause me considerable embarrassment. His act of turning the other cheek and offering the shirt off his back aren’t passive in nature. His nonviolent resistance is an attempt to curb my aggression. It’s a provocative way to call my hostility into question.

I find no justification in this passage to warrant abuse of any kind. If you find yourself in an abusive relationship, Jesus wouldn’t advocate turning the other cheek to mental of physical abuse. Jesus’ purpose here is to demonstrate how it’s possible to shut down further hostility. He doesn’t intend it as a model for abusive relationships.

Jesus summarizes his teaching by reciting the Golden rule, in verse 31. Contrary to popular opinion, the Golden Rule isn’t “Whoever has the gold makes the rules.” This Golden Rule has become proverbial in our day: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” It became known as the Golden Law in 17th century England and was subsequently changed to the Golden Rule.

As I was researching the Golden Rule this week, I discovered that James Cash Penny, in 1902, originally called his department store the Golden Rule Store. He named his store in this manner because it fit his personal and business philosophy. Some years later, his store’s name was changed to JC Penny.

This rule existed in various negative forms well before Jesus. “What you do not wish done to you, don’t do to others.” Well-known philosophers like Plato and Confucius made reference to it, but Jesus is the first to express it positively. Not only does Jesus forbid us from doing harm to people, he implores us to exercise generosity and good will to one another.

Jesus issues a series of three questions in verses 32-34, all rhetorical in nature. “If you love those who love you, what credit it that to you? If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? If you lend to those who lend to you, what credit is that to you?”

Turning the other cheek isn’t passive. It calls my hostility into question.
There’s nothing exceptional about loving people who love us, showing kindness to those who show kindness to use and lending to those who lend to us. Most human relationships are still regulated by this quid pro quo reciprocal arrangement. If people invite you to dinner, you return the favor and invite them to dinner. If people entertain you in their home, you host them in your home.

There are four Greek words for love in the New Testament. Three of these words rely on reciprocity. *Storge* expresses natural affection and is the kind of love family members share with one another. *Eros* is the Greek word used to communicate romantic love and *philia* is the word associated with friendship. Friendship, family and romantic relationships all play off reciprocity.

There’s one more form of love that isn’t based on reciprocity. *Agape* is the way God loves. Agape love is unconditional and unmerited. God loves us whether or not we love in return. Jesus closes this portion of his sermon with the same words he used to open the narrative, “love your enemies.” The fact that “love your enemy” brackets this passage is hardly coincidental. As indicated in verse 35, agape love seeks to love someone without expecting love in return. Agape loves with no strings attached. If someone loves you “no strings attached,” it means you are loved without conditions or restrictions.

Loving people isn’t necessarily dependent on whether or not you actually like them. Liking people has a natural, instinctual quality to it. We have a natural proclivity toward some people just as we have a natural aversion to other people. Agape love isn’t based on natural inclinations. That’s why it’s possible to love someone without actually liking them. You may not actually like some people, yet you can still aspire to love them.

So, what does this sermon have to do with my life? three suggestions come to mind.

1. Begin with an honest appraisal of you and your enemy. Your enemies are not nearly as monstrous as you conceive them to be. The flip side is also true: you’re not nearly as virtuous as you imagine yourself to be. A Yale Divinity School professor, Miroslav Volf, writes in his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, about the challenges of reconciliation when no clear line can be drawn between victims and perpetrators. “Forgiveness flounders because I exclude my enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners.”

Andy Stanley pastors North Point Community Church outside Atlanta, the second largest church in America. When someone comes to Andy for
“Don’t waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor. Act as if you did.”
- C.S. Lewis

marriage counseling, typically this person will begin ranting and raving, “My husband does this” or “My wife does that.” Andy recognizes that the conversation isn’t likely to go anywhere, since the person in question isn’t even in the room. So, Andy draws a circle and says, “This pie represents all the chaos in your marriage. One hundred percent of the blame is contained in that circle. I want you to draw the slice of the pie that represents your responsibility for the chaos.” Invariably, the person will draw a small piece of pie, perhaps only a sliver. Since the other person isn’t present to be consulted, Andy suggests they devote the balance of their time to talking about your piece of the pie. This is often where counseling breaks down. It’s incredibly hard to move people to focus on their piece of the pie. As long as people are focused on their piece of the pie, there’s likely to be little progress.

2. Ask for God’s help in loving your enemies. God knows you will need it. We can’t love people, most especially our enemies, relying on our own strength alone. We need God’s help and mercy to love people with agape love, since this type of love comes only from God.


It is to love what is loving and lovely....The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice....The world is always bewildered by its saints. And then there is the love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens and inflicts pain. The tortured’s love for the torturer. This is God’s love. It conquers the world.”

3. Take the next step. Don’t spend all your energy debating whether or not you will love someone who has wronged you. Just start loving them. I like the way C.S. Lewis expresses it in Mere Christianity, “Don’t waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor. Act as if you did. As soon as you do this, we find out one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you love someone, you will presently come to love them.”