

The Life of Jesus
Sermon 8: Teaching on the Mountain
"Love your enemies?"

Passages: Romans 12:14-21
 Matthew 5:38-48

Let me start with a silly joke:

A pastor is giving a sermon based on Jesus' command to love your enemies. "Now," he says to the congregation, "I'll bet that many of us feel as if we have enemies in our lives; so raise your hands if you do, and I'll pray for you." Most of the people raised their hands, so the pastor prayed.

The Pastor continued; "I've noticed that not all of you put your hands up. So, raise your hands if you have no enemies at all." Way in the back, only one very, very old man raises his hand. He stands up and says, "I have no enemies whatsoever!" Delighted, the pastor invites the man to come down to the front of the church.

"What a blessing!" the pastor says. "How old are you?" "I'm 98 years old, and I have no enemies." The pastor says, "What a wonderful Christian life you lead! And tell us all, how it is that you have no enemies."

"All the bastards have died!"

Today's sermon is about loving your enemies. Leaving all jokes aside, the first question we really need to ask is 'Who is my enemy? Is it simply anyone with whom I feel upset? ...anyone with whom I disagree? Is that my enemy?'

According to the Oxford dictionary, an enemy is "a person or group which is actively hostile to another." Or, to put it in more emotional terms, an enemy is a person or group that has harmed you (or is presently seeking your harm); someone who makes you feel **fear** and **insecurity**. This is why you may also feel **anger or even hatred** towards them, and a strong desire for **revenge**.

Let me tell two stories:

Story 1: Chanty—was an orphan girl in Cambodia. At the age of 12, a wealthy foreigner abused and exploited her. At just 13 years of age, Chanty was trafficked into Cambodia's sex industry.

After the foreigner was arrested, not only was Chanty rescued from the sex trade but she bravely testified against her abuser in Cambodia's largest ever paedophilia case. Her perpetrator was sentenced to 8 years in prison. He was set free only one year later!

What do you think Chanty would be feeling?

Story 2: Visier- In 1947, Nagaland, Visier's homeland, was forcibly divided between Burma and India. The Nagas decided to fight to regain their ancestral land. Visier was only six years old when the Indian army came and burnt his village. He watched as his father was tortured. For three years, Visier's clan hid in the jungle, surviving on wild vegetables, medicinal plants, monkeys and pythons.

In time, they surrendered and returned to the village. But because Visier's father was the chief of the village, he was often arrested and tortured by the Indian Army.

What do you think Visier would be feeling?

Let me be the first to admit that I have trouble understanding what it feels like to have an enemy...someone who is *actively hostile* to me. I mean, I've never been oppressed or persecuted. I've never felt any major injustice done to me! But if you're someone (like Chanty or Visier) who has had some horrific injustice done to you or your family, I can see how the emotions of anger, hatred and revenge would be very strong.

Indeed, these are the emotions that are often found in the Old Testament *Book of Psalms*. Listen, for example, to *Psalm 3*.

¹ ***LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!***
⁷ ***Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.***

Or, listen to *Psalm 143*.

³ ***The enemy pursues me, he crushes me to the ground; he makes me dwell in the darkness like those long dead.***
¹² ***In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant.***

Or, listen (with horror) to the emotional tirade of *Psalm 137* ...a Psalm which calls for vengeance on Babylon, the nation that, in 586 BC, captured and

destroyed Jerusalem and took many Jews into captivity!

⁸ ***Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.***

⁹ ***Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.***

Although we may be horrified to read these words in the Old Testament Scriptures, we should remember that anger, hatred and the desire for revenge are all *legitimate feelings*! For we have been made in *God's image*, and it is *God* who, first and foremost, *feels anger and hatred towards sin and injustice*! It is *God* who longs to bring perfect justice to His world. Indeed, the Scriptures speak often about the Day when He will bring vengeance upon all His enemies and restore peace and perfect relationships on earth.

What we need to remember, however, is that **God never encouraged His people to act out of anger or hatred, or to seek revenge**. To the contrary, He repeatedly told them, ***"Vengeance is mine; I will repay."*** In other words, although God knew how deeply Israel hated her enemies and how much she desired revenge, God was not willing for His people to take justice into their own hands. Justice was always up to God, and He would determine when and how disputes were to be settled.

Even amongst the people of Israel, God's Word was quite specific regarding how to settle disputes. If there was a dispute...if someone was acting with hostility towards another... God alone would determine the exact retribution that would be required, according to His ideals of equity and justice. That's why God established this Law of Retribution. In Exodus 21:23 we read— ***"Whenever there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."*** What this law did was to prevent people from flying off the handle and retaliating in any way *they* deemed appropriate! Although it couldn't stop people feeling anger and hatred towards others, *God's Law did restrain the human urge for revenge*.

This, of course, is the same approach that Jesus takes in today's passage! If you remember, Jesus is on a mountainside outside of Capernaum, in the far north of Israel, preaching to a crowd of Jews (mostly men) who had been living under the brutality of Roman rule; for years, they were the victims of unjust

land-grabs, oppression, and racial hatred. They were angry. They hated the Romans and saw them as their chief enemy. They wanted vengeance!

Indeed, this is probably why so many of these men followed Jesus to this mountain! They were hoping that He would be the One through whom God would finally *exact revenge* on their Roman enemies.

But, just like God did in the Old Testament, **Jesus calls on God's people to restrain their human urge for revenge. In fact, Jesus goes one step further, calling them to give it up altogether!** Listen to verses 38-42.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'^[a] ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Jesus is making two important points here:

First, like God did in the OT, Jesus is encouraging these men to wait for the Lord to act. Don't take justice into your own hands.

But, second, Jesus is telling them to *be like God*...to reflect the reality of their relationship with God by acting like Him towards their enemies! And so, in the same way that God always gives the human race more good things than we ever ask for, Jesus tells these new recruits to be like God towards their Roman oppressors—*"Despite the evil they do to you, respond by giving them good things!"*

Verses 39-45.

"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from 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."

Basically, what Jesus is saying here is that, even when people are *actively hostile* towards you, respond by being *actively loving* towards them, for this is how God acts!

Now, I know that this idea of *active love* is difficult for many to swallow. I can only imagine how those new recruits on the mountainside must have felt when Jesus when He said these words.

“Are you kidding? Love the Romans! You’re out of your mind! Go back to Nazareth!”

But even though they may have felt this way, the text indicates that no one said a word! No one questioned what Jesus was saying! No one stood up and challenged Him! Why not? **Because, deep down in their hearts, these Jews (sitting quietly at Jesus’ feet) knew that He was right!** When they heard Jesus talk about loving their enemies, something deep inside them would have resonated. And, in connection to Jesus’ earlier words to them about their true identity (*“You are the salt of the earth”, “You are the light of the world”. “You are a city on a hill”*), these new disciples would have begun to feel something swelling inside of them—a new-found pride in being God’s chosen people; a renewed calling to carry the blessing of Abraham to a fallen world.

You can even imagine how Jesus’ concluding remarks would have inspired them to be different than their pagan neighbours; to rise above the desire for revenge by allowing God’s character to perfect in them this attitude of *active love* towards their enemies. 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.*

Yes, Jesus’ words would have inspired them...

Well, at least for a day or two!

I say that because the fact is that, even if Jesus’ words were an inspiration to them...even if they resonated deep in their souls...even if they encouraged these new disciples to new heights of morality.... *Jesus knew that it could never be sustained.* The Gospels are filled with incidents where the disciples fail to love each other, let alone their enemies.

That’s why I say that *for someone to truly love one’s enemy requires far more than an inspirational sermon from Jesus.* What it requires is that **Jesus comes to live inside of us!** For the fact is that, in the history of the human race, **Jesus is the only human being who ever truly loved His enemies.** Jesus is the only human being who was *“perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect”*.

This is why the Gospel is not about a *wonderful teacher* (Jesus) who came to preach *wonderful concepts of love* to us so that we might be better people. No! Jesus came to die for us that He, by His Spirit coming to live in us, might bring His perfection into every one of us. By His death He brings death to our fallen ways of seeing the world. By His resurrection life, He brings us to new life and causes us to see the world with new eyes...His eyes!

Why, after all, do we get **angry**? Why do we feel **hatred**? Why do we desire **vengeance** and **retribution**? The answer is simple: **we see the world through fallen eyes**. We see the people who have *actively opposed* us or *hurt* us through the eyes of our own pain and wounding. Hence, we consider them our “*enemies*” and want to bring them down. (This is the reason why God calls us to postpone our desires for vengeance—because He knows that we cannot see the full story.)

But, **what would happen if we could see the world through the eyes of Jesus?** Surely, we would see every situation in an entirely different manner! We would see that the people who (we think) are actively opposed to us have their own issues... their own brokenness which is causing them to do what they do. They act and react out of their own hurts and pain.

Think about it: When Jesus was being crucified, He could have looked out on His persecutors as His *enemies* and called down retribution on their heads. But He didn't! Rather, **He looked on them** (the Roman soldiers, the guards, Pilate, the chief priest, the Pharisees and anyone else engaged in His death) **in the light of their past background**... as fallen human beings, blinded by sin and pain and disappointments...unable to discern what they were doing. That's why He took pity on them.

Furthermore, **Jesus looked on** each one of His persecutors **in the light of their future potential to be perfected**. And so, from the cross, Jesus holds out the hope that each one of these, His enemies, would, one day, be touched by God's love and be changed. He could already imagine them as “**perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect**”!

These are the two reasons why Jesus could pray from the cross, “**Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!**” Instead of cursing His enemies, He prayed that their eyes might be opened to the love of His Father and be changed... from enemies to friends.

If you can understand that, then you'll understand why, when Jesus told this new group of disciples, “**Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute**

*you”, He wasn’t simply trying to inspire them to a new level of morality. Jesus was actually speaking about the future ... about the day when the Holy Spirit would fall on them and cause them to see their Roman enemies **with new eyes**...with His eyes...and this be equipped to love their enemies, even as Jesus loved His enemies!*

In summary... these verses from the Sermon on the Mount aren’t a new set of inspirational sayings on how we should try to behave or a new set of instructions which are impossible for us to fulfill. **First and foremost**, these verses are about Jesus, for they lay out the blueprint for his own Spirit-filled life. In due course...,

- He would turn the other cheek.
- He would offer His cloak.
- He would walk the extra mile.
- He would give to the one who asked of Him.
- He would love His enemies.
- He would pray for those who persecuted Him.

These verses are about Jesus, the truly inspired Son of God, **who, by dwelling in us, can cause us to do likewise... to become perfect, even as our heavenly father is perfect!**

Back to Chanty’s story—Today, Chanty refuses to let her past rob her of joy. Despite the injustices and horror of her past, Chanty has no more thoughts of hatred or revenge, but talks with hope about the future. “God has a great plan for me”, she says. How does she know this? She adds; “I know I have been transformed by Him.”

Visier’s story is similar. He writes: “A turning point for me – in letting go of old hurts – was hearing that my friend Kolezo, whose brother was shot in the middle of the village, had found a way to forgive his enemies. He was planning to take revenge, but after intense spiritual turmoil decided to forgive his enemies. This challenged me to face my own ghosts. He made the most profound statement, “If I can have the courage to kill a man, why can’t I also have the courage to love him enough to make him a different man?” It’s clear that Visier now sees with the eyes of Jesus!

With the living Lord Jesus in our hearts, it really is possible to **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**

Let’s pray.