

# **I Was Just Wondering...How Do I Love and Forgive My Enemies?**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 5:38-48

Imagine you sit down on the couch, tablet on your lap, and open your e-mail. You begin to browse through all the new messages you've received until you come to the agenda for the upcoming meeting of a church committee of which you're a part; a committee, let's be honest, that is usually content with the same events that it does each year. The committee members are, as we might say, creatures of habit. On the agenda, however, is an item that catches your attention. It simply states: "new idea." "New idea," you wonder? "What could it be?" And at the meeting, all are sitting on the edge of their seats, waiting to hear about the proposed "new idea."

Perhaps that is what Jesus' disciples, as well as a crowd of people, were thinking when he began to teach during what we now know as the Sermon on Mount. What will he say? What will we hear from this man who heals people from their disease, pain, and sickness? After gazing over the large crowd of people that have come from places such as Galilee and the Decapolis, Jerusalem and Judea, Jesus heads up the mountain and sits down. His disciples gather around him and all listen to his teaching on a new way to live.

Before Jesus gets to the new ideas we find in today's passage, he touches on some old ones. "You have heard it said," Jesus declares in verse 38, "that the law says that punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'"

To what is Jesus referring? It's the law of reciprocity that we find in the books of Exodus (21:24), Leviticus (24:20), and Deuteronomy (19:21). This law demands that a lawbreaker suffers a punishment that fits the crime. If, for example, an eye is lost or a tooth is knocked out, the discipline should be the same; the criminal would lose an eye or have a tooth knocked out.

And if you dig a bit farther into some of those Old Testament passages, you discover that reciprocity is not just about eyes and teeth. It's also hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise, and yes, even life for life. The passage from Leviticus 24:20 sums it up well: "Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner."

More Old Testament teaching can be found in our passage in verse 43 when Jesus says, "You have heard the law that says you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy." The first portion of that statement comes again from the book of Leviticus, and while the second part (hate your enemy) is not specifically written in the Old Testament, it is a summary of what several passages imply, especially those imprecatory Psalms (58, 109, 137:7-9, 139:21-22) that speak of enemies in not-so-positive terms.

It should be noted, however, that these Old Testament laws did have two positive contributions: first, they taught justice was needed, that crimes should not go unpunished. We all know that any civilized society needs laws and rules to avoid living in the chaos that will develop. And second, it kept wild revenge in check. Prior to this commandment, it was possible that even a slight injury to a member of one's family could be avenged by maiming or even killing someone in the offending family. Moses said it must not be that way in Israel. The punishment must fit the crime.

Despite these "positive" aspects of the Old Testament laws, we can also see the problems and limitations with them, problems that were evident in ancient times and problems that still exist today, especially with how we treat our enemies, a question posed by our young people for this sermon.

Too often our reaction to the ill-treatment we receive from our enemies is something like: "Payback!" or "I will get even with you" or "This will teach you a lesson." And even if we don't verbalize it quite that way, we can still have the thought on our minds or perhaps buried deep in our hearts.

This can play out in the workplace, for example. A teacher is nearing retirement and plans to finish out her career at a certain elementary school. Those plans change, however, when a new elementary building opens in the district, and she is selected to transfer, against her wishes. The principal of the new school (and the district as a whole) now become her enemies. She often arrives a few minutes late, leaves before her work is

completed for the day, grumbles repeatedly in the staff lounge, misuses the copier, and is disrespectful to both students and her fellow teachers. She doesn't verbalize it, but the message is clear: I will get even for making me move without my consent.

This can also play out in the world of technology. People treat their enemies with disrespect by "ghosting" them (not replying to messages) or by posting rumors and lies on Instagram, Snap Chat, or Facebook, all in an effort to slash and ruin their enemy's reputation. They may even document the mistakes of others by posting videos of them on Tik Tok so as to cause them embarrassment.

Perhaps a bit more subtle, but equally as hurtful, are when people are purposely ignored at places like church. Others intentionally sit away from them in the sanctuary, or they knowingly fail to invite them to social events. We may not verbally call them our enemies, but the message is the same.

The message that Jesus is sharing with the crowd, about these Old Testament laws, now begins to shift. "Yes," Jesus says, "this is what the Old Testament says, but I tell you..." The people strain forward a bit, eager to listen to what Jesus will say next. They begin to wonder: "Has he come to abolish these Old Testament laws, to do away with them completely?" No, Jesus tells us in verse 17 of this same chapter, "I have not come to eradicate the laws, but to fulfill them, to make them complete with a new way of living.

If an evil person comes to you and slaps you on the cheek, don't slap them back, Jesus says. Instead offer them the other cheek as well. If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, then give your coat, too, even if it leaves you without any clothing at all, as may have very well been the case in Biblical times. If a soldier from an occupying army demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles, despite how degrading it feels. And when someone asks to borrow money from you, don't turn away but give to them generously.

All four of these steps are what one commentator calls "little confrontations", not ones that involve abusive or violent situations, ones from which we should flee. No, these little confrontations are ones where God allows us to confront the evil person with a surprisingly respectful and generous response. When we allow God to use us to break the world's pattern of good-for-good, evil-for-evil, we become salty, different, and useful in the meat of this world. It gives us a Jesus' lens as we look at others, it gives us generous hearts, and it makes us recognizable to others as Christians. It makes them wonder what's different about us.

We are also recognizable as Christians when we love our enemies, but how can we put that into practice, since, let's be honest, it is not an easy task. If you look at verse 44 of our text, you see Jesus' instruction on how and where to begin: you pray on behalf of those who are persecuting you. Your enemies may not desire to pray for themselves, but we can do for them what they may not be able to do on their own. And sometimes, the truth is that the only practical or even honest way we can love our enemies is to pray for them.

This passage seems to imply that this task is not one left to just us as individuals, but also communally as a church, for the verb for pray (proseuchomai) is 2<sup>nd</sup> plural in the Greek, meaning Jesus is not saying you (individually) go and pray for your enemies, but you all as a body need to pray for your enemies, implications perhaps for what we should include in our communal prayer times.

Jesus clearly wants us to keep our enemies in our prayers. We see that not only from this passage, but also by the way he taught his disciples and us to pray in the next chapter of Matthew. He said to pray like this: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors (as we forgive our enemies).

Jesus not only teaches this, but he also practices it on the cross when he looks at those who are persecuting him, those who nailed him to that cross, and says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). The same lesson seems to have been learned in the early church. We see it in Acts 7 when Stephen is getting stoned to death. He falls to his knees as the stones are coming at him and cries out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

When we get to verse 45 in our passage, we read another a motive for keeping this command. Until now the only reason we have been given was Jesus' words "but I say to you," which should be enough for us, but he gives us still more. He tells us that we should love our enemies and pray for them so that we may be drawn closer to him as children of God.

In other words, if, led by God's Spirit, we live this counter-cultural way, we will come to experience God the Father in an especially intimate way. It will draw us closer to him as his sons and as his daughters. Think of the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus is teaching the beatitudes. What are his words from the seventh statement? "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 4:9).

In her book, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom tells what it was like to experience being drawn close to God as one of his children, despite the many challenges she faced in her life. She and her sister, Betsy, were interned, as many of you know, in a Nazi concentration camp in World War II. Years later, at a Christian rally in Munich where she had given a testimony of her faith, she came face to face with the former officer who had watched over the women in that camp. He came up to her and said, "I'm grateful for your message, Fraulein; to think that, as you said, Christ has washed away my sins."

She stood paralyzed, staring at his outstretched hand. Finally, she prayed, "Lord Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness." As she whispered the words, she felt her hand reach out to grasp his. She said, "The most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that overwhelmed even me."

Corrie ten Boom, by God's grace, became a peacemaker; a conduit of God's amazing love, which enabled her to extend forgiveness to that former officer. But to be a conduit of God's love, she first needed to have a relationship with the Father as one of his children. The same is true for all of us.

As we heard this morning in our words of assurance from Romans 5, all of us, because of our sin, have actually become God's enemies (the same Greek word as in our text). We have fallen short of what we were designed to be as his image bearers. We hear that same message in Paul's words to the Colossians, where he says, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior" (1:21).

The good news, though, the news that should make us take notice, the news that should cause us to sit up on the edge of our seats, is that while we were still sinners, while we were still his enemies Christ died for us. And because of his death and resurrection, all those who place their trust in him are reconciled, forgiven, and brought close to him as his children.

Once we realize that it is God's mercy that makes this all possible, we are obliged as his followers to respond to the world with the same mercy. He calls us, by his Holy Spirit, to love our enemies, to pray for them, and to show them the same grace that we have experienced through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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