

week four

Monday

"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, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:43-45a NIV)

I have always thought that the word "enemy" was such a harsh word to describe someone. I very rarely use it, except when I am referring to "the enemy," but when I read through this passage of scripture I am reminded that even though I don't use the word often, there are those people in my life who I don't really care for, who offend me, who do me wrong and my attitude towards them is often quite different than the attitude I have towards those people in my life who are so much easier to love.

I have always had this secret agenda when it came to dealing with my "enemies." Whether it was a person who had hurt my sometimes very sensitive soul with harsh words, or a homeless youth striking me when they didn't get their way, or an African prison guard hurling insults while I awaited my turn in front of a judge for a crime I did not commit, I always had this belief that turning the other cheek, giving them my cloak, running the extra mile with them or giving them all they ask of me was purely for one purpose, *that they would come to know the grace of the God we serve*. I could somehow rationalize forgiveness, or going above and beyond for my enemies if it meant that by chance they might become Christians and change their ways.

Lately I have wrestled with this secret agenda. I have wrestled with the fact that it immediately puts an expectation on the enemy to become like me. Because after all if this is my thought process then it means that deep down I really believe I am right, they are wrong, I am without sin, they are the sinner...and this is such a dangerous line of thinking- purely from the fact that I am still very human, and still just as capable of sinning even as I strive to walk closer with Jesus. Lately I have felt God challenging me to see there is so much more to this picture He is painting in scripture.

What if this process of me turning the other cheek, giving my cloak, and running the extra mile is less about the need for the other person to become a Christian and thus more like Christ but is more-so about me being further refined into the image of Christ. What if my interactions with my enemies is less about them being sinners and the ones who are doing wrong and more about me remembering the sinner I am and learning more lessons about the Grace of God who sought me when I was His enemy?

Turning my cheek, going the extra mile, or offering my cloak as well, might radically transform the minds and hearts of my enemies, but I am under the suspicion that if I allow it to, it will radically transform my own mind and heart as well.

Father, help me to love those whom I very naturally tend to shun or want to harm. Help me to love those individuals and groups who want to harm me somehow. God, I believe this is your kind of love, one that trumps any evil response in my or my so-called enemy. As you help me love this way, help me to recognize that this love is not weak, not is it apathetic, but is of the same revolutionizing power that drove my Savior to the Cross. Amen.

Pam McKerring, Pastor of Mobilization

Reflect on these words:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” Matthew 5:7-9 NIV

“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, that you may be sons 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. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Matthew 5:43-48 NIV

“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Romans 12:9-21 ESV

Who are the people in your life that you are told are your enemies? What does it mean to love them as you love yourself?

Who are the hardest people to love?

What does it mean to live the above passages today?

What does it mean to live by the passages above, regardless of external circumstances?

Spend a few moments, either writing or speaking to God, about the difficulties you have with these passages and the specific people or groups it calls to mind. If you are able, ask that he would give you Christ's heart for all people, and that you would begin to have a “cross-style” love for those that you used to consider enemies.

“An eye for an eye... a tooth for a tooth”. Is Jesus quoting from the Torah or reminding people that it is Stanley Cup playoff time and anything goes?

I will be the first to stand up and say that I struggle with this passage. We all want people to get what is coming to them. We all want the last word. We all want retribution and want justice to prevail. But this scripture gets to the heart of the good news that Jesus came to proclaim – bringing the Kingdom of God to earth. This is what it is intended to be.

The contrast that Jesus uses here... “You have heard that it was said... but I say unto you” used to present quite an issue for me. I used to believe that Jesus is creating a new Torah – a new law that believers needed to follow. The struggle, if we are treating this as a new law, is to throw up our hands in despair as someone who is going to fall far short of the rules. If we as flawed humans treat this as a new law, we are going to be looking for loopholes because he really didn’t say what to do after turning the other cheek. He didn’t say that we couldn’t slap you upside the head after turning our cheek. Can you fire back when you run out of cheeks?

Our response as followers of Jesus should always be *what is the loving response?* What response best serves to bring about redemption? What is the most “others-centered” response I can provide for the good of the other person? But this works on an important assumption: Loving our enemies means forgiving our enemies. This doesn’t mean that there are no consequences. It also doesn’t mean that we are to ignore evil or deny any wrongdoing that may have been done to us. Forgiveness is not about forgetting. Forgiveness means that we name the wrong doing while eliminating the need to pay back the wrong doing in kind. Love doesn’t return evil with evil. Forgiveness releases the necessity of all that.

For many people, loving enemies seems like weakness. But could anything be more difficult, or more beautiful, or require more strength, than to love those who may wish to do you harm, or have actually already harmed you?

It is very interesting that at the end of this passage, Jesus associates or equates loving your enemies with praying for ones enemies. Try an experiment this week. I have used this myself and have found that it has helped me with my struggle with my enemies. Take some time and come up with someone you consider an enemy. Maybe it is someone you avoid when they walk into a room. Maybe it’s a co-worker. Maybe it’s an in-law. Once you come up with a name, or class, a sect or even a nation; resolve to pray for that person(s) every single day this week. Pray for your attitude for this person. Pray for what good you can find in them, as well as offer them. As you pray, you may find it’s difficult to wish someone well, and consider them an “enemy”. You may even find that God’s love reduces your usage of that word altogether.

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:6-8 ESV

God, I am captured by the thought that you loved us before we loved you. That you taught us in your Son, Jesus, what it means to love those who aren’t just of a different opinion, but are absolutely opposed to you in every way. You are indeed Love. I want this; but to have it, there are many things inside me that you must first tear away. Father, please remove everything from my heart that loves only those who love me, wish me well and agree. Help me love like you. Amen.

Rick Smith, Director of Administration

The more you let the words of Christ in Matthew 5:38-48 soak in, the more they seem to be idealistic enough to inspire, but unrealistic enough to drive us, possibly, to ask:

“Wait a minute, what about me? If I give my shirt, if I inconvenience myself for nothing, if I refuse to retaliate, if I pray for persecutors and people who put me in a jam rather than put them in their place, if I love and care for people who flat refuse to reciprocate, then who’s going to get my back? And don’t tell me “Jesus”, because I am talking real, day-to-day life here. What if at the end of the day, I’m the only one behaving this way...why would I want to live a crummy life for others when, in the end, no one ever did the same for me?”

Perhaps, now, more than ever, you understand the cross.

Love requires risk. It requires danger. It requires vulnerability (an interesting word that comes from the Latin, *vulnus*, translated “wound”). If there is no risk or vulnerability, then it’s more self-preserving, self-assured and, in some measure, selfish. If there is no risk, then there is no need for hope and faith in the Love of God.

With this in view, consider the very familiar (and therefore often very underappreciated) passage from I Corinthians, chapter 13.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” I Corinthians 13:4-13 NIV

It is a dangerous thing to live this way. You could do everything right and end up on a cross. You could live sinless and yet die at the hands of others who never got a thing right in their life. You could give and give and give, you could love, forgive, submit and surrender, and have people miss it entirely. But in so doing, you may also change the universe. In the very least, you will be living according to the way of the universe’s Creator. May at least that fact be your reward as you take up your cross and pour yourself out in love today. This is the work of Christ.

When we understand Jesus as giving new black and white rules in the Sermon on the Mount, we miss the point.

As we keep emphasizing, Jesus is illustrating what a heart growing in surrender to Jesus and His Kingdom looks like. But when we don't understand that, many times it appears that the way of Jesus simply isn't realistic, or even wise, so we lose confidence in Jesus and default to this mentality that thinks, "I'll trust my eternity to Jesus, but not my everyday living." And again, we do that because we miss his point.

Let me illustrate. Look at Matthew 5:42. Jesus says,

"Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

Now let's say you have a brother who is chronically asking you for money. Every time you see him, he's somehow hitting you up for more cash or asking you to loan him money for his next great idea. It's pretty obvious that continuing to give him money isn't helpful, but rather it's enabling really bad behavior. With an understanding of Jesus that assumes he's giving black and white rules here, an internal wrestling match starts to take place.

"I know Jesus says that every time somebody asks, you're supposed to give to them but if I actually do that with my brother, it's only going to cause more problems, more hurt, more pain and I can't do that."

See how that happens? We start to view the way of Jesus as idealistic theory that at the end of the day, really isn't helpful or even wise. So we go back to trusting ourselves more than Jesus, since he doesn't seem to know what's best...

Back to our example with the brother: what are the options with a black and white understanding?

- 1) Always give him whatever he wants because Jesus said to.
- 2) Don't give him what he wants, but feel guilty about it.
- 3) Move away and change your identity because if he can't find you, he can't ask and then you don't have to disobey Jesus.

You see that's where rule based religion leads—people looking for loopholes. But Jesus is after the heart. Jesus is much more interested in something like a fourth option where you do whatever it takes to let God shape in you an incredibly generous, giving heart that understands how to give to others with wisdom and discernment.

May you go throughout the day, asking Jesus to transform your heart so that you'll reflect his heart to others.

Jonathan Bow, Lead Pastor