

## Loving Our Enemies

**Matt 5:38-48**

**Romans 12:14-21**

This morning we're looking at Jesus' famous words about loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, extending hospitality to those beyond my comfortable circle of friends, and all that.

This teaching raises so many questions: it can raise questions about war, pacifism, self-defense, personal property, lawsuits, partisan politics (!) and so on.

This teaching is vulnerable to dangerous distortions, and we need to keep in mind that this is a teaching to the *disciples*—and therefore to Christ's *church*. This teaching is not given to a nation, or the United Nations or something like that; this is a message to Christ's church. This teaching was given to people who Jesus knew would be persecuted for their faith in the coming years; and so he is preparing them for what's coming.

And therefore when we talk about enemies here we're not going to talk about al Qaida or ISIS or "the Democrats" or "the Republicans." We're talking about a next-door neighbor, a family member, a co-worker, perhaps a fellow church member, and those Facebook friends and acquaintances who enrage us with their political posts. We're talking about people we have contact with. And,

we're talking about ourselves—Jesus' teachings are always an invitation to us to look within ourselves, to search our hearts and minds (because... Jesus meddles! In love, always).

My focus this morning is on interpersonal relationships, and our witness to the world as salt and light—and the surpassing righteousness that Jesus introduced all of this with. In the context of the whole gospel, and the context of Jesus' introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, that's how he intends us to look at it. The backdrop for this teaching is our witness as salt and light—our positive influence in the world, in Jesus' name. So when we speak about enemies and about how others might treat us— and how we treat them—the question is not “What are my rights?!?” but “What is my witness?” Am I demonstrating the power of the gospel through the love of Jesus (as it says in our church's mission statement)? This teaching on loving enemies is where the rubber meets the road with regard to that, and Jesus is going to tell us so.

**Bold statement:** how Christians respond to those we disagree with and come into conflict with and don't like, is *as* important and compelling a witness to Christ than anything else we do or say. It's as important than any church service we hold or evangelism strategy we employ or good works we can do. Or maybe

this is the “good works” that Jesus talks about when we let our light shine.

Because in loving enemies, this is when we are most Jesus-like; it’s what makes our light shine in the world. It’s what makes Christianity Christianity, it’s what makes grace grace. It’s enemy-love that makes Christianity Christianity, and what makes us his unique people; or as the old King James translation put it, his “peculiar” people.

38 ‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” <sup>39</sup>But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup>and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup>and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your friends, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (“mature”— Peterson translation)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

We begin with a story, as told by Mark Labberton, then the pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, CA, from his book, *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus*.

Doris explained that she would have had the muffins there, but she had been kidnapped.

That morning, Doris had parked in her usual spot adjacent to our church in Berkeley and was reaching back inside her car for her basket of oatmeal muffins. As she leaned in, she was powerfully struck from behind and pushed back into the car and across the console into the passenger side. Breathless, a young man jumped into the driver's seat and took off, with Doris riding shotgun. That Doris was in her early eighties, and had had her elegant silver-blond hair done as usual at 11:00 on Friday, didn't matter at that moment. Suddenly everything changed.

I made my way straight from church to her tidy apartment. Shaken but steady, Doris greeted me at the door. Every protective pastoral corpuscle was firing in me as I leaped at the chance to surround Doris with love and support in the midst of this trauma. But that day, as other times too, Doris proved to be my pastor more than I could be hers.

"After he took off in the car, the first thing I did, of course, was to ask him his name," Doris said. *Of course*, I thought. *When*

*mugged and kidnapped, start by asking for your attacker's name.* “He said it was Jesse,” she went on. “So I said, ‘Jesse, what are you doing?’”

“‘I’m kidnapping you so we can go to your ATM and get money out of your account,’ Jesse told me.

“So I said, ‘Jesse, why are you doing this?’”

“He told me it was because he needed the money for drugs. He was addicted and needed a hit. So I just said, ‘Well, Jesse, it’s a terrible thing to be a drug addict. You really shouldn’t be a drug addict. It’s not the way you should be living your life.’” *When being kidnapped, I reflected, at least make the conversation an honest one.*

By then, Doris explained, they had arrived at the first ATM machine, and after intimidating her for the password, Jesse jumped out to get the cash. As he sped away to the next branch, Doris said she explained to Jesse that he really needed help, that this drug problem was much bigger than he was. He needed help from God, who really loved and understood him. After the next branch stop, Doris told Jesse he also needed an effective drug rehab program. Jesse replied he had tried that, but Doris suggested he needed a better program than the one he described to her. Then she continued, “Jesse, God wants to help you.”

By the third bank stop, Jesse had hit the daily withdrawal limit for Doris’s account. Since she was no longer useful to him, he pulled the car to the side of the street and explained he was going to leave her there. He had what he needed, he said. But Doris was not done. “Jesse, I am going to pray that you get caught for this, because it’s wrong and you shouldn’t get away with doing this to people. I’m also going to pray that you will be caught so I can not only testify you did it, but so I can plead with the judge to get you into a really good drug rehab program. You need to get caught, so you can be stopped and helped. You need God to give you the strength to get off drugs and have a better life.” *I’m sure I would have said something just like this to a kidnapper.*

"Jesse was just going to leave me there, but I couldn't get out of the car because I was so battered and stiff. So Jesse said he would come around to the other side and help me, which I really appreciated. He came around, opened the door, helped me out, held my arm so I could get to the driver's side and then gave me his arm so I could get into the car. Then he put the seatbelt across me, leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

"So that's what happened," Doris said.

Pastoral adrenaline still rushing, I leaned toward her and with all the empathy I could exude, I said, "I am so sorry this horrible thing happened, Doris."

"It's true, it is horrible," Doris agreed. But then, without much of a pause, she added, "But the really horrible thing is Jesse's addiction to drugs."

"But it's awful that you should get attacked and kidnapped like this," I responded.

"Well, yes, but really, why not me?" asked Doris. "This sort of thing happens every day to thousands of people. There's no particular reason this shouldn't happen to me."

"Um . . . yes," I stammered.

When Doris finally said, "Let's pray for my getting over this, but also for Jesse," I was thinking that I was also in need of prayer as I tried to absorb this conversation.

It wasn't a great surprise that within a couple of months, Doris was at the police station identifying Jesse. Soon after that, she sat in the witness box at the courthouse: "Yes, hello, Jesse, remember me? Doris? I said I was going to pray for this moment and I told you why. Here we are! Yes, Judge, Jesse was the one, and yes, he did do all those things. And, another thing, Judge, Jesse really needs a good drug rehab program so he can get his life back. I know he's guilty. But he also really needs help, please, Judge."

As we have been saying during this series, these teachings from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are challenging because we are asked to do things that sometimes ***don't*** come naturally to us. Jesus wants us to think and act in an upside-down, backwards, Kingdom kind of way, which means we need to think and act in ways that sometimes don't come naturally to us.

By nature we *want* to retaliate when we are mistreated or disrespected. By nature we want to justify ourselves, and we want to have and keep what's rightfully ours. Doris could have gone to court and demanded that Jesse be given the maximum punishment. That was within her rights. But she learned deep compassion from her master, Jesus, who teaches us to practice a kind of love that extends beyond what is comfortable or easy.

What Jesus instructs us to do requires a surrender of the will—not to an offender, but to God; a surrender of our will to God's will—and it requires self-control of our *feelings*, in order to ***do*** what's loving and best, and not just what relieves our frustration or our sense of injustice in the moment. And that's not easy to do!

The governing principle and lesson here, and from Paul's words in Romans, is this: don't take matters into your own hands; don't seek revenge or retaliation.

**God** is the judge and, in the end, God will sort things out. That's God's business and not ours. Our responsibility, even if it means enduring some personal humiliation (turn the other cheek), even if it costs us some personal property (let them have your coat), even if it means being inconvenienced in some way (go the extra mile), our responsibility is to love and to do good to *everyone*. God is good to bad people, and he asks us to do likewise. Paul's words: live at peace with *everyone*; do good to *all* (not some, or just our friends, or those we think deserve it...). God feeds good and bad people, God sends rain on the good and the bad; and Jesus says, go and do likewise and you'll be children of your father in heaven.

And—let's be honest—this is hard to do, and we probably don't want to! It goes against what we would normally and reflexively do. Think of the most obnoxious person in your life, or the person you dislike the most. Love them? Yikes! It's not easy, but Jesus says "become mature—like God. You can do this! And I can help transform your reflexes and your habits so that you learn to truly love, even the people who are hard to love."

It's easy and natural for us to be good to good people, and people we like, and to our comfortable circle of friends, Jesus is telling us. It's less natural, but

God-like (or mature, in Jesus' words), to be good to bad and difficult people, even people we would call our enemies.

Today's teaching about non-violence is another example, perhaps the *best* example, of the beatitude: "blessed are the peacemakers." Jesus even repeats here the same second half of the blessing that he uses in the beatitude. In the beatitude he says "blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." Here he says "Love your enemies, so that you may be...children of your heavenly father." He connects the beatitude with this teaching on enemy-love.

This is probably the clearest biblical imperative for peacemaking because it potentially ends the cycle of violence. Because there is no retaliation or escalation on our part. We do our part; we don't have control over how others respond, but in doing our part it potentially ends the cycle of conflict, or violence.

Jesus is asking his followers to act in ways that are paradoxical and strange (Shane Claiborne: God wants to save the world through fascination). God wants to blow the minds of people who do unjust or obnoxious things, by having his people do *weird* things in response. Like being kind, generous and prayerful. Who in the world would've expected Doris to act the way she did? It's weird. But so Jesus-like. And it potentially stops the cycle of conflict and violence.

MLK (who knew something about loving his enemies): “*Returning violence for violence only multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. And darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that. We are to act justly in the face of injustice.*” Remember: the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better

It is important to note that what Jesus teaches here is not a strategy of weakness, but actually a strategy of great strength and wisdom. We’re not asked to be doormats. Jesus doesn’t tell us to do nothing, or avoid confrontation altogether, or lay down and take abuse. He says, rather, be *assertive*, and stay present to those who are bad to you. Stay present, stand your ground, do good, *but don’t get even*. Do good, but don’t get even. Resolve not to hurt back, but to love. This is not weakness. This is great strength.

How can a person stand strong and be degraded in these ways, you may ask. I think it is possible for persons to be ***degraded*** and to stand strong, only if they have been previously ***upgraded*** by Christ and made strong by *him*. And that’s what Jesus has done, and is doing for us constantly; he has upgraded us, and he strengthens us; we find our identity and our esteem and our worth in him, and therefore we can be strong in the face of obnoxiousness & badness.

In the context of Jesus' day and his audience, he is saying that in the face of enemies and persecution, you don't have to, and shouldn't, rely on the law any more ("the law says 'an eye for an eye'—see, I *get to* retaliate!"), and you don't have to rely on yourself any more. Don't rely on external props **or** your own self-manufactured internal fortitude.

What Jesus is telling us is, you and I are not strong enough internally, on our own, to respond rightly to these situations. If I rely on myself, I will either overreact and get angry and therefore do or say something unwise, or I will underreact and respond with an inner sense of humiliation. Neither response is good—for us, or for the other. Doris responded with God-supplied strength, because she knew who she was in Christ, strong in his love. And therefore was able to love Jesse, and plead for what was best for him; what he really needed.

Jesus is strengthening us, internally, for another way of being and acting and praying, in the face of enemy-obnoxiousness: he wants us to know how deeply loved and valued we are as children, so that we can love in return. **And**, so that we may be able to stand and look in the eye of an enemy, and for their sake and for ours, see that *we are fellow human beings, and perhaps not that different from each other.*

Because when I can slow myself down and stay present to a difficult or obnoxious person, pray for them, and be present to my own feelings and internal reaction to that person, I might find that the thing I dislike about that person is something I dislike about myself. I find that I'm looking in a mirror. This is another reason why Jesus tells us to love our enemies; not just because it has the potential to stop the cycle of conflict, but because God can use even our enemies to teach us about ourselves—and about the ways that we are our own worst enemy sometimes; because that person who really annoys me is providing a mirror for me to look into. And so I can say, "I do that too." Dang it!

When our church was first introduced to OPOP and started listening to the stories of former gang members and inmates, I began to think—I have had some of the same feelings, some similar problems. Then we met Dan Anderson, learned his story and began corresponding with him. And when I saw his picture for the first time, I was caught up for a moment, because I felt like I was looking into a mirror. He has a little more hair on top than I do, but there was enough of a resemblance that it got my attention, and his family background is somewhat similar to mine. Here is a 60-year-old Caucasian man who stumbled into drug addiction, and to support his addiction felt like he had to rob people to get money

(like Jesse). I remember thinking to myself, I'm one dumb decision away from ending up in a bad place.

If I can love someone who has the same shadows in their life that I do, I can learn to love myself—by loving them. That's a mind-bender, but it's true. And the result is that I become more patient, and more accepting over time. And I learn to be loved by God, because he loves all of us *equally*. That's the scandal of Jesus' teaching—God gives rain and sunshine to both good and bad, righteous and unrighteous. That's not fair! But who said anything about fair? Jesus is talking about grace. And grace, by nature, is not fair. Because it's available to everyone, no matter what.

Do you see how this is a strategy of strength and love, and not weakness?

This is the apostle Paul's prayer for the church, and my prayer as I pray for you and everyone I pray for: Ephesians 3:16-17: *"I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, <sup>17</sup>and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."* This is where the strength comes from, to do what Jesus calls us to do.

One last reason why we need to love our enemies (in addition to the reasons that it's a witness to the grace of God; because it potentially halts the cycle of violence & conflict; and because loving our enemies is actually a healing grace for us):

Finally, we love our enemies because an obnoxious person (an enemy) needs love. It's a healing grace for *them*, too. They are obnoxious for a reason. People often act the way they do because they are carrying hurt, loss, frustration, etc. Love tells them they are okay. Therefore loving them is a redemptive act, for *their* sake. Loving enemies becomes a potentially redemptive act for a person who is acting out. I know that when *I* am an enemy to someone and acting in unkind ways, it's usually because of something going on in my life, or inside of me; I've forgotten my belovedness, and I have lost my ability to be a decent human being to another person. We all have hurts and disappointments and what helps and heals us when *WE* are the enemy, is to experience the love of a person who has been strengthened in love by God.

This is Paul's point in his letters—Jesus made the first move toward us in love, when we needed it most. And in that strength we can take steps toward people and not away from them, in love, when they are enemies to us. For their sake, as well as ours.

Ruby Bridges story. She was the first black girl to integrate into an elementary school in Louisiana. Mobs gathered to hurl insults and slurs, and literally hurl things at her. Here is the full story from Guideposts:  
<https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/inspiring-stories/stories-of-hope/in-1960-little-ruby-bridges-bravely-entered-an-all-white-school>

Now grown up, Ruby tells her story of one morning when she was walking from her parents' car to the front door of the school:

"From her window, Mrs. Henry (her teacher) always watched me walk into the school. One morning when I got to our classroom, she said she'd been surprised to see me talk to the mob. "I saw your lips moving," she said, "but I couldn't make out what you were saying to those people."

"I wasn't talking to them," I told her. "I was praying for them." Usually I prayed in the car on the way to school, but that day I'd forgotten until I was in the crowd. *Please be with me, I'd asked God, and be with those people too. Forgive them because they don't know what they're doing.*

Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

