

“Love Your Enemies”

Perhaps we're so used to hearing what's taught in churches that we miss how exceedingly radical is Jesus' teaching and instruction. “Love my enemies”? Huh? Why would I want to do that?” every normal person on earth thinks. It's likely that when the scribes and Sadducees heard that Jesus taught this, they choked. “Love the Romans? No way! We want them all dead!” In their view, Jesus couldn't possibly be the promised Messiah because their Messiah would come riding on a white horse, flashing his sword and, with immense charisma and power, defeat the Romans and liberate Judah from under their hated boot. Judas Maccabeus had already done that two centuries before, liberating Judea from the Greek tyrants, and their anticipated Messiah would do that too with Rome.

So, let's ask: Why didn't He? After all, that was the Danielic vision. There would be a succession of four great empires, Babylon, then Medo-Persia, then the Grecian empire, and then Rome. And then Messiah would come, totally defeat Rome and replace it with His eternal Kingdom. That was Scripture! And the writing prophets anticipated Israel being restored, being great among the nations on earth, an autonomous Kingdom with a Davidic King. That too was Scripture. What happened?

A great cosmic conflict is in the background of all Scripture. Who has the right to rule? God is good, as in, exceedingly, infinitely good. Satan was an extremely beautiful creature made to serve God in some unique way, but he turned into the embodiment of evil. As Creator, God is of course supreme and sovereign Ruler, but Satan in proud self-exaltation, seeks to usurp God's role so that he might rule over God's creation. Using wicked means such as deceit, lies, brute force and other evil strategies, Satan and his vast army of demons took dominion of humanity. These wicked beings have filled the earth with hatred, lies, violence, and a lust for power over others as well as other such evils. They have turned all humanity into rebels against a good God and His righteous rule.

Satan intends to rule forever with impunity. Impunity? So it seems. If God were to simply exercise His power to deal with Satan, God would be using the very evil thing that Satan values most, viz, force, and that would be unjust. So . . . Who has the right to rule? Answer: *the one who loves his subjects*, not the one who forces himself onto his subjects. Thus the Son came to earth humbly, in profound weakness; obediently and in transcendent love He gave Himself over to death so that His subjects might have life. It was a humiliating and agonizing personal sacrifice that expressed infinite love, showing that the incarnate Son, Himself deity, has the right to rule. Satan does not. In the future, Satan will be justly forced into hell for the eternal punishment he deserves. God has dealt with evil by means of love.

We don't fully understand the cross. We suppose that it was for our justification, to obtain forgiveness of sins. Yes, it was certainly for that. But it was mainly the supreme manifestation of God's love for those who despise Him, for those who are in rebellion against God as evidenced by their sins, for those who are in thrall to Satan and his wickedness. The cross was the most exquisite demonstration of God's unique, transcendent, selfless, indeed self-sacrificing love conceivable. Thus John 3:16. Thus the criminal on the cross next to Jesus received the offer of a relationship with Jesus; to make what was happening right there explicit, Jesus expressed love for the rebellious sinner so that he might have life in the next existence. Jesus loves His enemies; Jesus has the right to rule.

But we don't get it. Sin has clouded our understanding of things spiritual. So Jesus had to give a command for us to obey, “Love your enemies.” Jesus could command His disciples to love their enemies precisely because He's God. And He wants us, His followers, to be like Him, that is, to be like God. God loves His enemies. So His followers are to do that too. In this interim era until the Return of Christ, we who believe in Christ are to be Christ-like and extend the love of Christ to God's enemies all over the world. It means being humble and selfless. It requires embracing weakness and personal sacrifice. And it means trusting God for the consequences (and, perhaps, for vindication). We do it by sharing the Gospel of love to those who currently belong to Satan in the hope that they will be loosed from his grip and instead love and serve Christ. Thus we're God's agents of love and goodness; we're continuing and extending Christ's work of defeating evil. Let me make it explicit once again: We defeat evil by loving those who are the epitome of evil, those who hate us and who hate God, *enemies*. We thus display God's goodness and love, indeed, His very nature. And that glorifies God. And when that future, long anticipated day arrives, Christ will return and fulfill the Danielic vision and all that the writing prophets promised. That will end 6,000 years of sordid human history and climax God's mission to restore all Creation.

But there's this issue: Why should anyone who's a believer and has Scripture's promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life want to love enemies? We have an easy, comfortable, peaceful life. There are significant risks involved. We're not being compelled into doing it. The "rewards," whatever they are, don't sufficiently motivate. Why do it? Answer: We will obey Jesus out of love for Him. If we're in relationship with the risen, living Christ, and we know who He is and what He's done for us, we love Him. And we trust Him. And we're eternally grateful to Him. And out of that relationship flows obedience. (If not, there's no relationship!) We realize that to serve the exalted Christ, who is our life, is the greatest privilege there is for anyone. So we love our enemies in the way that Christ revealed we're to do it.

Righteousness is not merely refraining from hurting our enemies, as we (simplistically) suppose. Righteousness is blessing them – although, obviously, not in a way that abets whatever evil they may be doing. Wisdom is needed. And what about the justice aspect? We leave that to God to deal with.

I think that we can be even more comprehensive about Christ's command to love our enemies. If we indeed love our enemies, surely we also can love those who are less than enemies. So those who are unlovely or unpleasant to be with, those who disagree with us, those who are different from us in one way or another, those who threaten us or offend us or disgust us or use us . . . in short, everyone else. Our attitude toward others, all others, is love. And love is as love does. We love with God's kind of selfless, self-sacrificing, giving love, a love that seeks to help and bless others.

We can love others by not being critical. It's way too easy to criticize others, but love overcomes that temptation. We censure others. We manipulate others. We have in us a hornet's nest of bigotries. We gossip, which is really a subtle way of hurting others. We can not only refrain from doing any of these things, we can despise even the thought of doing them and commit to love others instead. Love intercedes for others. Love encourages and teaches others. Love forgives. Love serves others in need, it makes allowances for the faults and failures of others, and it . . . well, read 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 again and again.

Loving enemies isn't in the Mosaic Law. It's the law of Christ. We've had this command in our Bibles for 2,000 years, and almost everyone in the Western world knows it's there. Many in the West greatly admire this teaching of Jesus on love. But I suspect no one – as in, NO ONE – takes this instruction seriously. Our sin nature enslaves us, and we can't and don't know how to break loose from its controlling power. So let's review what the Gospel is. Jesus came to take us to the Father. But [unless we're the generation that experiences the Rapture] we go to the Father when we're dead, raised and glorified. So let's understand that Jesus ALSO came to make us fit, in the here and now, in this life, to be in the presence of the Father, which means to be like Him. Holy. The law of Christ does that, if we obey it. But Jesus' laws can only be obeyed by those who are indwelt by and yielded to the Holy Spirit. The most precious – and absolutely necessary – part of the Gospel is the gift of the Spirit to enable us to obey Christ's law. Jesus is the embodiment of love, weakness, humility, and obedience. Only in Him is there the ability to overcome sin and be holy, and that's why His Spirit indwells believers. We're saved not by a propositional statement in Scripture, but by a living Person.

The issue is big. We must be obedient to overcome sin. Sin is, itself, a judgment by God for disobedience. Whether we're Augustinian or semi-Pelagian in our theology is irrelevant, we must will to obey God's Word. One of the reasons the Son came to earth in human form was to express obedience. So, Yes, if we're in Christ, His perfect obedience is imputed to us. But we're still required to be obedient to the Word and will of God. Our willingness to obey Christ is how we yield to the Spirit and we live out the life and love of Christ.

Let's conclude by observing that what makes Jesus' instruction to love our enemies seem radical is our fallen-ness. What God wills for us, how humanity is to be and to live, is good, and just and wise. The problem is *us*. We are so saturated with sin and so used to evil that God's goodness seems to us to be extreme. We desperately need to be transformed so that we can live out God's goodness. Anything less denies our humanity; that's because God created us to reflect Him.

Dear Reader: God is doing something really great in this world. And if you're a believer in Christ, He's called you to participate in it. There's no such thing as a passive believer; that's an oxymoron. We must not – dare not – be indifferent to God. So let's commit ourselves to total, selfless, active obedience to Christ, even to loving our enemies, regardless what the consequences may be. To the glory of God.