

“On Enemy Love”
The Way of Jesus
October 11, 2020
Downtown & Lexington

Imagine showing up to LifeGroup this morning and you're greeted at the front door by someone who you don't like - in fact, it is someone who has personally wounded or offended you - who has given you inner grief and frustration over and over and over again.

Or we're getting closer to the holidays, and perhaps you're reminded of people you're going to have to sit across from the dinner table with in the next couple of months. People who have hurt you or insulted you or caused you all sorts of pain and trauma for years.

Or what about this. Imagine you're driving through our city - and you're on Gervais and you pass by our state capital building. In light of national events, you see a large group of Black Lives Matter folks protesting on the capitol grounds with signs and loudspeakers. And as you're driving you notice another group and they're white supremacists with their own signs and loudspeakers. And in that moment as you're driving past you see a riot begins to break out among the two groups.

Those examples confront us with this - **what happens when we encounter an enemy? Whether it's personal or ideological - what do we do?**

This morning Jesus is going to answer that question for us. And before we get into the text, let me just say that a running theme in Jesus' unpacking of the Old Testament has been how we treat one another. That as a follower of Jesus, how you treat other Image Bearers is indicative of your love for the Lord - and in this final one, Jesus intends to crank the heat up and make us squirm a bit because this command he's going to tell us feels the hardest to live out. He's going to tell us to love our enemy. So if you have a Bible go ahead and turn to **Matthew 5:43-47**.

Now, this topic of enemy love can feel like this nice, abstract idea in large part because we don't have enemies as obvious today as they did in the Middle East 2,000 years ago. So for us, it can feel a little bit like Jesus is gonna pull out his acoustic guitar and sing kum-bah-yah. And part of living in a post-Christian world is that we can miss just how radical Jesus' teaching really is and I would imagine most folks Christian or not wouldn't bat an eye at the concept of enemy love. And yet, when push comes to shove, it feels like in our culture we are more divided and embittered towards one another than ever.

To put it another way: we love the idea of love, but it can be really hard to actually put it into action day after day." Like, I love my kids and there's nothing I wouldn't do for them. But y'all, virtual school with a 5-year-old and 4-year-old is maddening in our house right now. And I'm discovering I can talk a big game about love but come find me at 10 in the morning and you'll find that I am struggling to carry any of that out.

I would imagine most of us are the same way. As soon as we have to love others we begin to make excuses. Dostevsky says this, speaking through one of his characters 140 years ago, and I find this to be telling of our current moment:

Dostoevsky

The more I love humanity in general the less I love man in particular. In my dreams, I often make plans for the service of humanity, and perhaps I might actually face crucifixion if it were suddenly necessary. Yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone for two days together. I know from experience. As soon as anyone is near me, his personality disturbs me and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours I begin to hate the best of men: one because he's too long over his dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps on blowing his nose. I become hostile to people the moment they come close to me. But it has always happened that the more I hate men individually the more I love humanity..

And so Jesus is going to give us a challenge this morning and show us that your faithfulness as Christians is going to be tested on the battlefield of human relationships. How you treat others - and in particular your enemy - will either strengthen or weaken your love for Jesus and your ability to experience what He wants for you right now.

Alright let's get into it:

Matthew 5:43-44

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Let's break down Jesus' words from verse 43 further.

“You shall love your neighbor...”

This is straight out of Leviticus 19. Jesus will later say all of the law is wrapped in the double command of love of God and love of neighbor.

“...And hate your enemy...”

What's interesting is this is nowhere found in the Old Testament. And the general consensus is this is another one of those examples where the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day have added on extra non-biblical commands. So Jesus here is calling out this concept to get back to an original understanding of OT law and to break down some common cultural assumptions:

Who is my neighbor?

We got into this during our Greetings from 2020 series, but back then “neighbor” was a pretty limited term. Someone who lived near you, who you share a lot in common with - namely your faith and ethnic background.

Who is my enemy?

An Enemy was essentially anyone outside that limited definition of neighbor. For the sake of our text today, we'll define enemy this way: **An enemy is a person or group of people who cause you harm, discomfort, and/or who stand against what you value.**

Now with that definition in mind, as Jesus' audience would have heard this they would most likely have had two groups of enemies in mind:

1 - Personal. Someone who personally caused you grief and pain

2 - Corporate. Living in a strong-group culture, the Jews would have thought more in this category. Not so much an individual enemy but a collective enemy. If you just skim the Old Testament you begin to notice quickly that Israel always had some larger enemy or oppressor, and Israel was almost always on the side of the oppressed.

- Israel and the Egyptians
- Israel and the Philistines
- Israel and the Ninevites
- Israel and the Babylonians

And Jesus says in light of your enemies - whether personal or corporate - your charge as a follower of Jesus is to love them. To agape them. To pray for them and want good for them. Can you imagine the shock value that such a statement would have made?

In **verse 45** Jesus continues:

Matthew 5:45

For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

In other words, Jesus is saying if God blesses and gives gifts to people who are His enemies, who are far off from Him and may even hate Him, then we as followers of His Kingdom, are called to mimic His character in this way.

We see this play out in Jesus' ministry. Instead of hating and rejecting his enemies, he loves them:

- You see Jesus interacting with a **Samaritan woman** in John 4, a social, ethnic outcast and enemy of the Jewish people - Jesus shows compassion and mercy towards her when no one else would
- You see Jesus interacting with a **Roman official** - a person who literally helps enforce the oppression and tyranny of the Jewish people, Jesus shows compassion and heals his daughter in the process
- You see Jesus showing immense agape love to **Zaccheus**, a Jewish tax collector. Someone who was socially ostracized by his Jewish community because He was financially oppressing the Jews and he was giving that money back to Rome, who would in turn use that money to build their power and crush the Jews

- Or even with the **Pharisees**, people who stood against Jesus and His ministry and would often use religion as another form of oppression. Jesus even loved them by calling out and condemning their wickedness publically. To call out sin for what it is, and evil for what it is. To condemn when people treat others as less than the Image Bearers that they are. That too is an act of love.

So notice the shape Jesus's love takes pending the person:

- he loves by showing compassion
- he loves by serving and helping
- he loves by coming alongside
- he loves by speaking corrective truth

These are the shape that his love takes towards those who would have been considered enemies

Because God's character is not of bitterness or division. He is Love. And out of his agape love, He is patient and blesses even those who hate Him and calls out sin and wickedness because He is in the business of bringing even His enemies into the family of God.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

We see this all throughout the New Testament. God saving those who are far-off, the enemies, the ones you least expect. Bringing them under conviction of sin and saving them purely by His grace. One big example of that is the apostle Paul, who prior to His conversion was on a man-hunt to stop this Jesus movement - and God saves him and commissions him to tell others about Jesus, to develop leaders, and plant churches. One of the biggest enemies of God ends up writing a good chunk of the New Testament and even gives this command over the church in Rome:

Romans 12:14, 17-21

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... 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.

We see evil and we fight back not through means of force but through good. And if God shows compassion to His enemies, then we ought to as well. Because every single human being is an Image Bearer of the King. That no matter their religious background, their political affiliation, or what they've done or even their stance on social issues - no matter what, the call for followers of Jesus is to see past all of it and see that **the most true thing about them is that they bear the Image of God**. And so as a response our call is to show compassion and conviction, grace, and truth. To call out and condemn evil

but not to respond the way the rest of the world does - we don't dehumanize, demonize or destroy people in the process because that's not the way of Jesus.

Note: Jesus is not saying "Don't have enemies." He's saying you will. Sometimes you can win them over and sometimes you can't. But as followers of Jesus, our tactics towards our enemy are gonna look different.

Now I admit, living in America now, we don't have the exact same kind of enemies they had in the first century. There's not a clear demarcation of who is on one side or the other.

But bring that definition of enemy back: **An enemy is a person or group of people who cause you harm, discomfort, and/or who stand against what you value.**

So let's define what it means for someone to try and harm you or cause you discomfort.

- **Harm** - this one is overt. A person or group of people who seek to hurt you either physically, emotionally, or psychologically would be considered an enemy.
- **Discomfort** - this one's a lot more subtle. They're not flat-out raking your name in the mud or wanting to harm you, but they seek to make your life miserable. That too would be an enemy.

And let me just say real quick here - that LifeGroup member who just seems to annoy you all the time with what they do or say is not your enemy. Or that person who you got into personal conflict with recently - maybe a spouse or roommate- not an enemy. That's a nuisance, sure. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here.

- **Stands against what you value** - This is an ideological enemy. I'll give you a really easy example of this right now: politics. We've said before that as a follower of Jesus, politics aren't our ultimate hope, but we have verses on what we should care about. And for the last several months we're seeing more ideological enemies arise.

Maybe you stand up for a change in our country and you find others oppose you.

For example, maybe you stand for racial justice - for fair legal treatment of African Americans in our country, to end the systemic oppression of African Americans for hundreds of years. And you have enemies who are against the good you seek - white supremacy in all its forms - whether subtle or overt - who believe their skin color is more superior or who deny that we should do anything. They are an ideological enemy.

Maybe you stand for protecting the hundreds of thousands of unborn children who are murdered every year through abortion. And in our country, you have people who are against what you stand for and would in fact call you evil and backwards and bigoted for what you stand for. They are an ideological enemy.

[And not to say we can't have disagreements in our church family about what the best way is to go about these issues, but you do need to realize that we very much have ideological enemies who are against what we stand for biblically.]

And then check out what Jesus says in verses 46-47:

Matthew 5:46-47

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

You see Jesus makes an interesting observation on how human beings work:

- The natural bent of humanity is - you treat me well, I treat you well. It's a positive upward spiral.
- AND, the natural bent of humanity is, if you do something hurtful or oppose me, then I'll oppose you right back. And it becomes this downward spiral that breaks down communication with people, with societies, that can ripple down through family trees. This idea that hate usually begets hate. Is it any wonder why we find ourselves in a cancel culture?!

And Jesus came to redeem and set apart for himself a community of people who have experienced enemy love first hand...through his death on the cross for us. And who therefore are equipped and empowered to extend enemy love as they go out into the world, and break the cycle. And say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. And we can fight back but not with the same weapons as the world. We fight back armed with love and doing good. How badly does our nation need this right now?

One example of what this looks like that comes to mind:

Charleston church shooting in 2015 - in our country where we have no obvious enemies, of course, this one feels like the one where this man is the enemy. Who walked into a church only two hours from here, shot and killed nine people, and before the jury said, "I have no regret for what I did....it was worth it" I don't know what you do with that. But Jesus' command is still true: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. And the families of the victims did just that. One of them, Nadine Collier, was able to say to Dylan Roof in front of that same jury: "I forgive you. You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul."

You see when we're empowered and equipped by Jesus, we are able to become people who can stop the perpetual cycle of hate. Armed with love we can say Enough. We can resist the enemy and in so doing live up the name of Jesus. And our response to our enemies become the litmus test of if we're following Jesus or not.

Activist and writer Dorothy Day says it like this:

Dorothy Day

I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.

When I first read that, that hit me. Because I admit, I really love my friends. I love the people I get to work with and I love my LifeGroup that I get to do life with. And honestly, I'm pretty comfortable with hanging out with people I enjoy. They love Jesus, they love me, we share similar interests. And I can get so caught up in Jesus-centered family that I totally miss out on the mission. And I think Jesus out of compassion for us is telling me and you, that our church family is not an end in itself. Our family can't simply be this isolated bubble who get along and talk about Jesus. But we're supposed to be on mission - having the awkward conversations, doing the tough work of forgiveness, constantly inviting people in whether they reject us or not. If all we're doing is facing inward, Jesus would say, "You're missing out."

On the flip side, some folks have an easy time loving the sinner they aren't close to (or the one their reaching), but the hardest imaginable time loving the person who sits next to them every week in group.

And so how do we get out of our comfort zone and love those who feel impossible to love, how do we love our enemies? Jesus gives us two commands: We pray for them and we love them.

Matthew 5:44

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

So real quick, on prayer. We'll unpack more about the power of prayer coming up soon in this series. But let me just say, that when you pray for someone who you don't like, who may very well be your enemy, and you pray for them what God wants for them - it does something to you.

When you pray for your enemy to be brought to a conviction of sin, and for them to experience the love of Jesus in their lives, for them to be adopted into the family of God, for them to live a life of flourishing and grace in the same way you have experienced grace. Those kinds of prayers consistently and over time begin to rewire your heart towards your enemy.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way when we pray for our enemies. And Lewis is writing this during WWII, and he cites two enemies who were alive at that time - Hitler and Stalin, so replace those names with another evil political figure or dictator who's alive right now:

C.S. Lewis

When you pray for Hitler and Stalin how do you actually teach yourself to make the prayer real?

The two things that help me are (a) A continual grasp of the idea that one is only joining one's feeble little voice to the perpetual intercession of Christ who died for these very men. (b) A recollection, as firm as I can make it, of all one's own cruelty; which might have blossomed under different conditions into something terrible. You and I are not at the bottom so different from these ghastly creatures.

What he's saying is when you really pray for someone who is an enemy of yours, you start to see that deep down you're not really so different from them. We have the same sin disease granted their evil is

more fully formed. They are an Image Bearer just as much as you are even if they deny that others are Image Bearers. They need Jesus just as much as you need Jesus. And that moves you to pray for them more and more, and at the same time, wanting their evil to stop.

So in LifeGroup this week we're going to take Jesus' command seriously. You're going to be asked who is your enemy. And you're gonna spend some time praying for them. That out of His sheer grace, God might turn your enemies into brothers and sisters.

And the other command Jesus gives to us is to love them. To agape them. Where it moves beyond praying these things over them but to then be the hands and feet of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit to carry that out and into their lives.

And loving someone doesn't just mean feeling positive thoughts about them. You can actually love without those feelings. But that we resolve and commit in our minds and hearts, out of our prayers to show them the love of God through our words and deeds whether it means condemning what they're doing or not.

That will mean loving your enemy will be limiting, and draining, and exhausting, and exposing the sin in your heart over and over again. It's going to cost you. It may mean that they don't become a Christian, or you don't win them over, or that through your actions it just incites them even more to attack you - Either way, your call is to reflect God in the process.

My question to you, how is that possible? Why would anyone want to do that? I hear that story and I think, "I don't know if I could do that."

The answer is because Nadine Collier, and those hospital workers in Syria, know something deep down - that you and I once an enemy of Jesus too.

Romans 5:10

...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son...

Jesus embodies this on the Cross, when suffering at the hands of His enemies. Literally, the people mocking Him and beating Him, Jesus in His dying breaths prays for them.

So in LifeGroup this week, to get this really practical so that we can become pictures of Jesus in our city - we're going to ask you - what's one thing you can do this week to love your enemy? Maybe it means befriending them because Jesus would, maybe. Or it could mean, that out of love for God and others that you say what they're doing is evil because Jesus would do that too. And you pray to God that evil would one day end. Loving your enemies does not mean you try to be friends with all your enemies.

- **Harm:** If they harm you, as in they intentionally inflict pain on you - maybe enemy love looks like praying for them to come to Jesus and calling out that evil - or even calling the police so that they stop or wanting justice to be upheld - but you can do it in a way that models dignity, not dehumanization.
- **Discomfort:** If they bring discomfort to you, maybe enemy love looks like praying for them that they would be brought to a conviction of sin and trying to win them over with your acts of kindness. Maybe. Or maybe it looks like telling them to stop. **Either way, we don't destroy them**, but we remind ourselves that they are Image Bearers too.

And again, if it's someone in LifeGroup who just annoys you and doesn't mean to, you need to pray for yourself and repent. That's not an enemy. Your kids who get on your nerves, that's not an enemy. That's a nuisance and God has put those people in your life to convict you of your lack of patience and grace.

- **Ideological:** They stand for everything you're against. Maybe it looks like praying for their hearts to change no matter what. Maybe it looks like protesting or voting or having conversations with those people who disagree and tell them why you believe they are wrong. Either way, we don't demonize them because they are fearfully and wonderfully made too, even if they don't agree.

And what if right now what's keeping you from experiencing the rule and reign of Jesus afresh in your life is your refusal to love such people?