

Love Thy Enemy, Easier Said than Done

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“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ But I say to you, Love your enemies” (Matt 5:43-44). These are the words of Jesus taken from his famous ‘Sermon on the Mount.’ Biblical scholars often see this as the ‘new law.’ Just as God delivered the old law to Moses on Mount Sinai, so now Jesus (the Son of God) delivers to us the new law on a mount.

However, this ‘new law’ is not always easy. It does not merely stop at a list of ‘thou shall not’s, but it calls forth from us a deeper spirit of love and generosity even in the face of opposition. And the command to love our enemies is a perfect example of that.

Why should we love our enemies? In a way that makes no sense. Why would I love someone who hates me? Jesus gives two answers to that question, and I will begin with his second answer. He says, “if you love those who love you, what reward have you?...Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (Matt 5:46-47). We see that as Christians we are called to a higher standard. We are not to act just as the world acts, but to rise above the bare minimum.

How much higher are we to rise? Jesus answers, “that you may be sons of the your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good... You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:45, 48). We are called to the holiness of God Himself!

This level of holiness is a goal to strive for, and one we can only achieve with the help of God’s grace. If we examine ourselves, we will see that we do not measure up to this high mark of love. Yet this should not lead us to despair. Rather, we ought to be patient with ourselves as we strive for this greater form of love in which we resemble God Himself.

That being said, we should not excuse ourselves of hatred. What is hatred? What does it mean to hate? Hatred is more than just being angry with someone. We all have times when we are mad with another person. In those times we are called to “first be reconciled to your brother” (Mt 5:24). Anger is a feeling towards another person. It is meant to be temporary, to correct a wrong, and then to lead to reconciliation. Sometimes we need to confront the person we are angry with; other times we should just let the anger go. Either way, anger should be temporary.

But hatred is when we are not only mad at someone, but when we harbor ill-will against them. That could mean that we passively wish evil upon them, or we actively work evil against them. This is fundamentally un-God-like and un-Christian. As St. John tells us, “he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1Jn 4:20). So, let us examine our hatreds.

If we have a struggle with someone, and we declare that we will never forgive them or that we will never speak to them again: That’s hatred. That’s un-God-like. That’s un-Christian.

If we seek revenge against another person, even in the form of gossip: That’s hatred. That’s un-God-like. That’s un-Christian.

Even if we do nothing against another, but we take pleasure in their misfortunes: That's hatred. That's un-God-like. That's un-Christian.

If we verbally attack someone because they have differing political views than us: That's hatred. That's un-God-like. That's un-Christian.

If we leave our parish or withdraw our support of a religious organization because of a disagreement with a pastor or minister: That's hatred. That's un-God-like. That's un-Christian.

Our world tells us to declare as enemy those who upset us or disagree with us and to punish them, ignore them, or despise them; in a word: to hate them! But our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to love our enemies. Let us strive to let go of our hatreds and to become more like our heavenly Father.