

RADICAL TEACHINGS OF JESUS

I love Jesus and His word. That love motivates me to be obedient to His teachings, and not just the ones I like. I admit that there are some of Jesus' teachings that I don't like. Why? They're too radical. Some are pretty hard to swallow. They are counter to our culture and fly in the face of our human nature, even offending our fragile sensibilities. During the next few weeks, I'm going to address a few of them that are particularly difficult for me.

The first one is found in **Luke 6:27-36**: ²⁷ **"I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."**

So, Jesus speaks to us plainly about "**loving our enemies**" – and as I said, it's not on my top ten list. It defies logic and reason. It conflicts with my impulses and feelings. To be honest, I don't "*want*" to love my enemies. Deep down, I "*want*" to despise them. Jesus, however, does not give me that option.

It may help to know that "**loving**" *our enemies does not mean we have to "like" them*. Neither does it mean you excuse, let alone condone their actions. It doesn't mean that you embrace them like a member of your family or even like a close friend. The type of love Jesus speaks of here is not about emotions. It is not about feeling warm and fuzzy. It is not feelings of friendship and certainly not of romance. Having said this, it's not a reciprocal response either - loving someone because they love us or because they've been particularly kind or helpful. This "*love*" is about having goodwill for all men, seeking nothing in return. It is the agape love of God operating within human hearts. At this level, we love people not because they appeal to us - or because we appreciate their attitudes or behavior - or because they possess some loveable trait - or because they deserve it. We "*choose*" to "*love*" them because God does. We "*love*" our enemy, even though we "*hate*" what they've done or are doing.

We do not need to feel affection for someone who wants to kill us or do us harm. We are not expected to have fondness for one who threatens our families and vows to destroy us. Then, what are we supposed to do? How, in practical terms, am I to love an enemy such as a member of Isis or the Klan? How am I supposed to love one who's personally hurt me? Who's stabbed me in the back?

In our text, Jesus says we are to **pray for our enemies**. That is not something that my flesh wants to do. I don't want to pray for my enemies, I want to punish them. Some cheapen Jesus' words by insisting they pray every day for their enemies: "*God, please give them what they got coming to them.*" To be frank, David prayed similar prayers at times - called imprecatory prayers, meaning they "*invoke evil or curses upon*" enemies. In **Psalms 58:6-8** he prays, "**O God, break the teeth in their mouths... Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun.**" Now I could pray like that, but I seriously doubt this is what Jesus is asking us to do. If there's a time for that, it's not what Jesus is telling us to do. He says "**bless those who curse you.**"

That pretty much rules out imprecatory prayers here. Jesus is calling for us to bless our persecutors. Yet, I do not believe He is telling us to ask God to bless them in their sinfulness in any way that furthers their evil intents or agendas. Somehow, we're to pray for justice, but also be willing to extend mercy. How do we do that? For me, it begins with a confession that what I have in my heart for my enemy is not love – followed with a sincere request for God to change my heart as well as theirs.

Later on, in what we call the Lord's prayer, Jesus teaches that we need to **possess a spirit of forgiveness** for those who trespass against us. I hate to have to admit it, but once more, that is not my first response. I want to get even, to retaliate, to strike back somehow. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "*He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.*" I suspect he was right.

When we forgive, we choose that we will no longer allow for the things that were done to be the focus of our attention. We will not let them be barriers between us. I can tell you that though I despise my enemies' actions, I do not hold malice in my heart toward any one today. That has not always been. I have been so upset with people who have been cruel to me or to those I care about that all I've wanted was vengeance. I've harbored ill-will and plotted retribution. By God's grace, that is no longer the case.

Elsewhere, I'm instructed to do good to my enemies; **helping them** when they are in need; To feed them if they're hungry and clothe them if they're naked. That's not what I want to do. I want to rejoice that they're having a tough time. It's what they deserve. But, once again, I can't follow my heart here. I have to follow Jesus. How can I possibly find the ability to do this? It may be noble, but it's not rational. I tend to think it's impossible. But with God's help, the hardest of hearts can soften: theirs, mine or both. Bitterness can melt away into mercy. God's word declares foundational truths that have helped.

Romans 5:6-11 says: "**You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.** ⁷ **Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.** ⁸ **But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** ⁹ **Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him!** ¹⁰ **For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!** ¹¹ **Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.**"

That same text says **He loved me** though I was His enemy; an ungodly sinner. That same text says **He also forgave me**. That's the idea of being justified. He forgave my sin debt. Because I deserved it? Not even close. **He helped me** – providing for my deepest need. He gave me the true manna from heaven. He gave me living water. He clothed me with righteousness. The more I realize that God loved me – the more I am challenged to love my enemies. In the process, I move closer to the likeness of God. For in those moments that I find it in my heart to pray for my enemies, to forgive them, and yes, even to help them, I am like my heavenly father. That's what Jesus means by saying we'll **"be sons of the Most High- because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."** God loved a world of despicable murderers and adulterers; foul-mouthed, lying, cheating, stealing, selfish ingrates. And when we choose to love them, we who claim to be His children actually start to resemble Him.

I once heard of a man in his late 90's who claimed he had no enemies in this world. When asked how he managed to live so long without having enemies, he said that was exactly how he managed it. He outlived all of them. Instead of "*outliving*" them, Jesus says we're to "*out-love*" them.

I firmly believe that love is the only instrument in the world that has the potential to truly change a foe into a friend. But, even if it doesn't, those who choose to love their enemies will please their Father in heaven and will imitate Him in incredible ways. Listen to these passages:

(Ephesians 4:32-5:3) Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

(1st John 4:11-13) This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.

You see, Jesus plan is raise up an army of disciples that look at enemies the way that He and His Father do - as people to love and care for and provide for – and yes, even perhaps to die for. Jesus came to save us from our sins and to transform us into His Father's likeness – and obeying His radical teaching allows for the Holy Spirit to go to work in our hearts to accomplish that very thing.