

Learning to Love the Enemy

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson on March 16, 1986 at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA: Scripture Lessons: Genesis 45:1-14; Romans 5:10-11; Matthew 5:43-48.

In the Name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Love your enemies! That's probably one of the most difficult commandments to obey. But I believe that it's possible to learn to love our enemies, to bless them, to do good to them. I haven't learned that lesson very well. I'm still in school. But I've met people whose lives have shown me that we *can* learn to love our enemies. I think of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose public life was dedicated to the principle of loving his enemies. I think of the Revd. Allan Boesak and Bishop Tutu in South Africa who, despite the great provocation of the South African Government and the system of apartheid, have stood for loving their enemies rather than destroying them.

But not only *can we learn* to love our enemies, *we must, or else we can't really claim to be God's children.* That's what Jesus said. He said that we're to love our enemies "that you may be children of your father in heaven." Think of that! John Calvin, commenting on this verse wrote that Christ "definitely states that no-one shall be a child of God if they don't love those who hate them". In other words, whoever wants to be a Christian *must* love their enemies.

We must also love our enemies *if we really want to point others to Christ.* Many a person who never darkens the door of a church knows very well that Jesus commanded us to love our enemies. And so very often these non-churched people throw this commandment into our faces. "You say you believe the Bible. You say you trust in Christ. Well, why don't you obey him?" They hear us saying unkind things about others. They hear

about fights and arguments among Christians. They hear Christians put down people of other races and express vindictive attitudes. They laugh at the way Christians of different denominations fight and put down one another. So if we want to point friends, neighbors and relatives to Jesus we must learn to love our enemies.

The first step in learning to love our enemies is to *recognize that we have enemies*. Sometimes it's really hard for us to admit that we have enemies. Who are our enemies? She's the girl who steals your boyfriend. He's the guy who tries to pick a fight with you in the school cafeteria. He's your six year old brother who won't let you play with his transformer. She's the woman who takes your job. It's your neighbor who walks right by you on the street and doesn't say hello. Your enemy may be your mother or father, sister or brother, son or daughter. Your enemy may be your boss who won't give you a raise or your employee who rips you off by stealing from you. These are some of our enemies. But sometimes it's really hard for us to admit we have enemies.

Bruce Larson, a Presbyterian minister and writer, tells of a man in his congregation that he just couldn't get along with. He felt this man was critical of his ministry and unsupportive. He felt anger and hostility towards him. He didn't know how to respond to him. One day Larson came home grumbling to his wife about this man. It wasn't the first time he'd done it. He was hoping his wife would commiserate with him and together they would think up all sorts of rotten things to say about this man. But this time his wife said to him quite frankly, "Why don't you do what you're always telling your congregation to do?" "What's that?" was his angry reply. "Why don't you admit to yourself that you just don't like him and that you have no love in your heart for him and ask God to change your

heart?" Larson didn't like that and stomped out of the room pouting. Later that night when he was praying with his little daughter at bed-time it suddenly occurred to him that his wife was right. He admitted to himself that he neither liked or loved this man. And with his daughter beside him he confessed to God his lack of love. This confession was the first step in learning to love his enemy.

It's really hard for us, sometimes, to admit that there are people we don't like or care for, people that we don't even want to like or love, people that we actually enjoy saying bad things about; people that you just love to hate. But this is what we *must* confess if we're going to learn to love our enemy.

A second step in learning to love our enemies is simply to *stop doing anything unkind to them*. In our society we don't usually go out and beat up people we don't like. The law frowns on that sort of thing and, besides, it makes us look bad to punch somebody out when they tick us off. What we really like to do is get back at our enemies in ways that won't get us in trouble with the law or make ourselves look bad; so that we look like the innocent victims. There are all sorts of subtle, polite, sophisticated, dignified ways of attacking those we don't like.

We sometimes stay awake at night thinking up ways to get our enemies goat. We ignore them. We don't speak to them. We scowl at them. We're rude to them. We don't greet them. We avoid them. We say bad things about them when they can't defend themselves. We curse them. We pick up our marbles and go home. We cross the street just so we won't have to greet them. We drive by and look the other way just so we won't have to wave. That's what Jesus was talking about when he said, "If you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the

Gentiles do the same?"

One of the most destructive weapons we use is our tongue. Sometimes it seems that my tongue takes on a life of its own. The tongue can be especially destructive. Whenever we say anything unkind about anyone, *even if it's true*, we're attacking them. How I dislike it when I find that someone has been talking about me in a critical or gossipy way. It really hurts and angers me. I take it as an attack upon myself, just as if that person had stabbed me in the back. My first reaction is to want to get back at them in some way.

I must add, though, that it's good to talk about the anger and hurt we're feeling. Jesus gives us detailed instructions in Matthew 17 as to what to do. He says that if we have a gripe with someone, don't talk *about* them, ~~talk to them. Go to them directly and talk with them.~~ If they don't want to hear you, you're not to go out and talk down this person with everyone. Go to one another person, a spiritual mother or father, a minister, an elder, deacon, or trusted friend and talk. Sometimes you might have to go the authorities if you are being physically threatened. You might have to talk to someone about your rights that might be threatened. But we're not to go around among friends and family and talk down our enemies. We'll never learn to love our enemies as long as we continue to say and do unkind things to them. So a second step in learning to love our enemies is to stop saying or doing anything unkind towards them.

A third step in learning to love our enemies is to *take positive action*. St. Augustine once wrote, "Many people have learned to turn the other cheek, but don't know who to love someone who strikes them." Jesus said, "Love your enemies". Love isn't simply a passive thing. It's not simply stopping from doing and saying unkind things. It's doing something

positive, even when we don't feel like it.

I want to suggest three positive steps to take in the way of loving our enemies. The first is contained in our text. *Pray for your enemies.* Jesus prayed for his enemies. On the cross he said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Sometimes your enemies are really stupid people. They've never learned how to deal with other people. They don't really know how to deal with their frustrations. They simply don't know what they're doing. But even if they *do* know Jesus commands us to pray for our enemies.

I've learned something about praying for my enemies from an Anglican Priest, Morton Kelsey. He prays the Lord's Prayer for his enemies. I think it's a good idea and I've tried it. If John is my enemy, I say, "John's Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name in John. Thy kingdom come in John. Thy will be done in John, on earth as if he were in heaven. Give him his daily bread, all that he needs to sustain and enrich his life. Forgive John and help him to forgive others. Do not lead John into temptation but deliver him from evil. Let John's joy be in your kingdom and power and glory forever and ever." How can I do or say anything unkind toward John as long as I'm praying for him like that?

But there's something more important. There's real power in intercession. God answers prayer. And as we pray for our enemies, God changes us and our attitudes. He can also change our enemy and his or her attitudes.

A second positive thing we can do in order to learn to love our enemies is to *bless them*. In the KJV of the Bible we read, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them." Many of the best and earliest manuscripts of the NT don't contain

that fuller statement since they probably weren't in the original Gospel. But since the teaching is found in other places in the Bible we can learn from these words how better to love our enemies.

Not only are we to pray for them, we're to *bless them*. How do we bless them? We say good things about them. We stop saying bad things about them and begin to say good things about them. Most of the time the people we don't like aren't really evil people. Sometimes they're committed Christians, just as much as we are. Sometimes they've gotten a raw deal in life themselves. Most of the time they're people a lot like us. They have feelings. They hurt inside. They get frightened. They love. They hate. And they have a lot of good qualities. We need to discover what these good qualities are and communicate them to others. That's how we ~~bless our enemies.~~

I remember being among some friends. Tongues were being sharpened to criticise another person who wasn't present. The list of the persons failings grew and grew until finally someone remarked, "You know, my husband really likes that man. He has really enjoyed going out to breakfast with him from time to time. He finds him to be a very compassionate man." It was like a bombshell. The whole tone of the group changed and the negative conversation about the man stopped immediately. We learn to love and even like our enemies when we begin to speak well of them and to bless them.

A third positive thing we can do as we learn to love our enemies is to *do good to them*. When we do loving things for an enemy a strange transformation begins to take place within us. We find that we begin to feel more positively about the person for whom we've been harboring resentment. It's really hard, if not impossible, to dislike people whom

we've made happy. *And when you think about it, it's not the people who do things for us that we love the most, but the people for whom we do things.* We learn to love our enemies, then, when we begin to act genuinely lovingly towards them. Even when it looks like all that you're doing is doing know good.

Finally, when we learn how to love our enemies *we become like Christ.* We become God like. The NT scholar, Alfred Plummer, once wrote,

"To return evil for good is devilish;
to return good for good is human;
to return good for evil is divine."

That's what Jesus is telling us to do, as difficult and as contrary to human nature as that is. Return good for evil. That's what Joseph did in our OT lesson and in doing so he was a OT type of Christ. It's a Christ-like thing ~~to do~~ to return good for evil. Paul wrote, "when we were God's *enemies*, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son." A Christ-like man or woman doesn't simply go home and sulk when unjustly treated by another. A Christ-like man or woman doesn't wait for the enemy to come begging for forgiveness. The late G.A. Studdert-Kennedy once said, "The whole idea that you have to wait until your enemy repents, before you love him... is contradicted (by God). God doesn't wait until a person repents to love him." A Christ-like man or woman does what God did in Christ, at least in this one respect, he or she loves the enemy, takes the initiative, goes to the enemy, not in hostility, but in order to seek reconciliation. A Christ-like man or woman can't be happy until he or she has come to love, yes, even like, his enemy. Well, I'm still struggling to learn these lessons. They are tough lessons to learn. No one is saying it's easy. But I hope and pray that you'll join me in the struggle to learn to

love our enemies.

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever.

Amen

Let us pray: O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth; deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.