

## Loving Enemies

### *That you may be children of your father in heaven*

Reflection 22 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

Now in our series on “The Last Great New Command” – and in our efforts to be a place that helps us live a life of love, no small feat, that – we come to Matthew 5:43-48, and perhaps the most remarkable statement ever made by anyone, and the signature statement of Christianity, the iconic, most distinctive statement of Christianity, Jesus’ teaching, “Love your enemies.” It’s part of a sermon that begins astonishingly with –

Blessed are the poor in spirit ...  
Blessed are those who mourn ...  
Blessed are the meek ...  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ...  
Blessed are the merciful ...  
Blessed are the pure in heart ...  
Blessed are the peacemakers ...

But as he moves further into the sermon, Jesus gets even stranger, and tells his followers to love your enemies. In Luke’s coverage of this in Luke 6:27-36 (and I go there because if anything it’s even more emphatic), Jesus says it four ways (in case we miss the point):

Love your enemies,  
do good to those who hate you,  
bless those who curse you,  
pray for those who mistreat you.

And then he gives some examples of this. If someone strikes you on one cheek (which is perhaps the one insult that most instinctively demands retaliation), turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak – a Roman soldier, say, or someone in a law suit – do not stop him from taking your tunic. He goes on. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. And then Jesus summarizes the principle here with what we now call the Golden Rule: Do to others as you would have them do to you.

None of this requires much commentary. If you must criticize or correct someone, how do you like to be criticized or corrected? If you strongly disagree with someone, how do you like to be disagreed with? If you don’t like being spoken to in a certain tone of voice, don’t speak to others in that tone of voice. If you like to be heard, hear others. If you like to be accepted, accept others. If you want to be fully understood, seek to fully understand others. If you like to be treated kindly, treat others kindly. Anything confusing so far? It’s Lesson #1 in learning a life of love.

Then Jesus moves on to why we, as his followers, love our enemies. And the first thing he says is: What is remarkable or extraordinary or even worth mentioning about loving those who love us? Even “sinners” do that. The most fundamentalist mullahs and

preachers in the world, the most fierce prophets of hate and violence, do this. But how does any of this change the world, or in any way make it better? So Jesus draws us to a higher standard, and says, “Love your enemies!” Do good to them, to those who hate you and curse you, who say all sorts of unfair things about you, who misrepresent you, who thwart you and mistreat you. Even lend to them, that is, to your enemies, without expecting to get anything back. Because then your reward will be great.

At first this seems crazy. But think about it! It will be great! The benefits will be great! Think about all the wasted energy, being defensive, on guard, always protective and calculating, not to mention, retaliating and seeking vengeance.

And then Jesus says one more thing: We love our enemies because it is in doing this that we are most like God. Now however vengeful or tyrannical or fire-breathing your picture of God may be, Jesus is saying, very simply and clearly, “You’re wrong.” And whatever frightening stories you can come up with from the Bible, Jesus is saying that when looked at from the big perspective, and understood in living context, the most high God loves even his enemies. Yep, that’s what Jesus says! And if you aspire to be a son or daughter of your Father in heaven, start doing what your daddy does, and love your enemies, even the ungrateful and unkind. Take the moral high ground. Rise above pettiness. Win your adversary over by kindness. And break the cycle of violence. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.

Now has anything been unclear to this point? Is there anything possibly confusing about what Jesus is asking of us? But of course we’ve been here before, and nothing happens. This is a hard saying: “Love your enemies.” It is completely counter-intuitive. And I don’t like this saying. If attacked, I want to attack. If insulted, I want to insult. To do otherwise goes against everything we are otherwise taught, maybe especially in a society as competitive as ours, and as adversarial as ours. But I would add that the historic church has never taken this teaching of Jesus seriously, except for maybe a few years in the sixteenth when the Anabaptists (from whom came the Mennonites) tried to live it, but the Lutherans and Calvinists and Catholics killed most of them.

So what are we to make of this teaching? Did Jesus really mean it? Why would we do what goes so much against our instincts to do? I suppose for one reason and very simply, because this alone works. This alone makes us children of our Father in heaven, high-flying, free, liberated, able to get on with the things we know to do, like maybe building or investing in a refugee program or a clinic/school/retreat center someplace in the Third World where otherwise fear and violence spread. The only thing that works is loving our enemies. It alone can save the world. We might have been excused once for not knowing this, but not now when – with only a little effort – we can see the results of 2000 years of ignoring this, and surely not now in a post 9/11 world.

So much is at stake!

So much was at stake when Jesus first said these words.

– Dale Pauls

*Part Two (of two) next week*