

## Loving Enemies (Part Two)

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

Reflection 23 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

So we have this perfectly clear but completely counter-intuitive saying, “Love your enemies.” There is a historical context. When Jesus first spoke from that mountainside, he was addressing a nation on the eve of destruction. He knew how angry they were, and he knew their militant nationalism – their hatred of Rome – would lead to national catastrophe on a horrifying scale. Tens of thousands would be massacred. Jerusalem would be completely leveled. For almost 2000 years, his people would be a people in exile.

And knowing this, Jesus said: Do not resist the evil ones. Do not retaliate. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Love your enemies. Jesus, the one we follow, said these things. Of course as he himself also said, only a few would find this way, and a generation later his people were destroyed. But his words – his truth – still remain. And it is still the only way that over time works.

Sometimes, at certain historic moments, there is evil so monstrous that all we can do, in the spirit of *The Lord of the Rings*, is ride out and meet it. But in the long run, it comes down to learning to love our enemies. And in either case, we cannot run away from it, not as followers of Jesus. Of course, following Jesus is the rub. If we’re following somebody else, getting our signals for daily living from, say, talk radio, or from some other highly politicized source, what then? It does come down to whom you trust. In the end, whom do you trust as a primal life decision? Who will see you through this life, and the life to come?

Jesus is showing us a way for the world to become entirely different than it is, but it takes learning to love enemies. It means when your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink (Romans 12:20-21 citing Proverbs 25:21-22). I don’t want to do this, but it happens to be true, and it is what Scripture teaches. And the mess we’re still in 2000 years later tells us what happens when we don’t really follow Jesus.

It means, in the words of Jesus, that when people attack us, when they say all sorts of unfair things about us, when they misrepresent us, we pray for them. We even lend to them expecting nothing back. I don’t want to do this. I don’t find it easy. But it happens to be true, and it is what Jesus taught. And the mess we’re still in 2000 years later tells us why he taught this.

It means following in Jesus’ footsteps (1 Peter 2:23). When others hurl insults at us, we do not retaliate. When we suffer, we make no threats. Instead, we entrust ourselves to him who judges justly. I don’t want to do this; it’s just for 2000 years we haven’t, and it’s not working.

It means in the words of Yale professor Miroslav Volf “being willing to embrace the evil other,” knowing that we cannot even get to justice and truth – we cannot discern justice

and we cannot speak truthfully – until we acquire the will to embrace the “evil other.” The stories we tell ourselves about good guys and bad guys, about victims who are absolutely pure and perpetrators who are absolutely evil, are usually not entirely truthful stories. Those who insist on the truth most heatedly usually turn out to be dishonest themselves. In their single-minded search for a certain truth, there are many truths they do not see. And those who insist on justice most passionately, in their passion usually commit their own injustices.

And if embracing the evil other seems too radical, it’s essentially what Jesus is saying in our text when he says to follow God who causes his sun to rise on the good and the evil. And it’s what Jesus did when he hung in excruciating pain on the cross, mocked, struck, beaten, scourged, nailed, and hung, and somehow still fought through the pain to “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Loving our enemies means we stop and look and see. We will see that so often when we are angry with someone, we ourselves have the same defects we so resent in them. We might even be the ones doing what we say they’re doing. We will also see that often the ones we’re angry with are doing the best they can. Given their background, their life experience, and their unawareness, they may be doing the best they can. They truly do not know what they are doing. And when we see this, we will learn to treat them with love, and they will (maybe) respond in love, and we will find ourselves living in a loving world which we ourselves following Jesus have created.

Loving our enemies means becoming aware of whom we are enemies to. Remember that’s always the question with Jesus. To whom are you a neighbor (not who is a neighbor to you)? To whom are you a friend? To whom are you an enemy? Whose life and livelihood are you putting at risk? Whose rights are you violating? Whose dreams are you crushing?

It means becoming a movement of people devoted (as Jesus was) to peacemaking, with a commitment to ending misunderstanding, and distrust, and hatred, and alienation, and exploitation, and violence on planet earth, who seek to create a new world committed to human flourishing everywhere. It means leaders of influence and power walking into angry mobs that hate them, and saying, “If you’re that angry, if only blood will do, take mine!” And the mob will melt away. Or they will kill him. And from such martyrdoms, on the mornings after, peace will break forth on earth. It’s the way of Jesus. It’s what he did. It’s the message of the Cross. And it’s what he calls his disciples to do.

It’s the only way that works, that over the long run creates peace we can trust. For sure, it’s part of learning to live a life of love. It’s so much more than “the right church” and “the right baptism.” That may be all some people want because it excuses everything else! But it’s so much deeper. It demands so much more! And it is the answer – the only answer. The salvation of the world, the future of the world, depends on the way of Jesus, the way of the Cross.

Jesus is calling into being a new humanity who will live by principles never before followed and who will love their enemies. And swords will be beat into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4). The wolf will live with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6). Men and women of ripe old age will sit in city streets filled with boys and girls safely playing (Zechariah 8:4-5). The battle bow will be broken (Zechariah 9:10). God will proclaim peace to the nations; they will not learn the arts of war anymore (Isaiah 2:4). Jesus is calling into being a new people redeemed and transformed, skilled in the arts of trust and forgiveness, a new humanity, a worldwide movement, a global network devoted to peace, so that beside ever network of terror there is a network of love undermining, and if necessary absorbing, the hate and the violence. It's all part of creating on earth finally what Jesus came to create: people helping people to learn to live a life of love. And the world depends on this. Our children, and our children's children, depend on this.

– Dale Pauls