

Love Your Enemies
Matthew 5:38-48

We Americans are a diverse people. We come in all shapes, sizes, and ethnic groups. Moreover, the rise of mass media has further divided us into distinct generations, each of which has its own taste in clothing and music, almost to the extent of having its own culture. Even our language shifts from generation to generation, from hep to groovy to far out to cool to phat to sick (and if you don't know what some of those words mean, you have just proven my point).

But if there's one thing that all Americans, old and young, urban and rural, black and white and brown have in common, it's that we insist on our rights. From the Boston Tea Party to the Black Lives Matter movement, we have all been taught to put up a struggle whenever anyone tries to take advantage of us. "You can't do that to me – I've got my rights!" This is our universal battle cry.

And so today's passage may be the strangest, the most difficult of all of Jesus' teachings for us modern Americans to accept. For when we are insulted, Jesus doesn't tell us to fight back – He says we should submit to yet another insult. He says we must turn the other cheek, and allow ourselves to be slapped again, to be humiliated again. He says we must not insist on the sanctity of our own dignity, or even the sanctity of our own person.

But what if we are robbed? What if someone takes what is ours unjustly? Instead of seeking restitution, Jesus says that if someone were to take our coat, we must give up our cloak as well. We must not ask for our things back if someone else has taken them. We are not to insist on our rights.

Yes, this is what the Bible says, no more and no less. And there's just no way to put a spin on it. Jesus is telling us to give freely of ourselves, even to those who are intentionally trying to abuse us. There's just no way to wiggle out of it: "Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away." It doesn't matter what his motives may be. It doesn't matter if he plans to pay us back or not. It doesn't matter if what he asks violates our rights. We are to give to those who ask, regardless of whether they deserve anything or not.

"But surely, preacher, you are taking all this too far. Surely you are going to extremes. It's only reasonable to stand up for our rights. That's the American way!"

Yes, but is that the Christian way? After all, if we have placed our trust in Christ to save us, haven't we had to admit that we are nothing more than sinners, rebels against God? Moreover, if we are honest with ourselves, don't we continue to break God's law every day? Don't we live more often for our own pleasure and profit than for His glory and the good of others? No, if we condemned criminals have any rights, it is only a right to God's wrath, a right to death, a right to all the pains of hell.

No, standing on our rights just doesn't make sense for Christians. Instead, we are called to a life of radical humility, a life of considering the needs of others to be more important than our own, a life of putting God and His glory ahead of any of our own priorities. Even if that means letting other people take advantage of us, we are called to give, to serve, to love.

But Jesus isn't finished with us yet. For He says that even if we let go of our rights, even if we allow ourselves to be mistreated and cursed and persecuted, that is not enough. It is not enough to accept the abuse of our enemies with stoic determination. It is not enough to respond dutifully to those who mistreat us with good actions. It is not even enough that we give blessings through gritted teeth to those who curse us or that we pray reluctantly for those who do us harm.

No, Jesus says we must love our enemies. We must not simply say, "Well bless your heart," in that oh-so-insincerely Southern way. We must earnestly desire that God truly bless our enemies because we love them with all our hearts.

But how in the world can we do this? It's hard enough to love people who haven't gone out of their way to hurt us, but this? This is impossible. Surely there is some sort of spin we can put on this. Surely, there's some way we can dumb this down, some way we can bring these verses into the realm of possibility.

And so we're naturally tempted to lawyer up, to start splitting hairs. Love, after all, has lots of meanings. Yes, we say that we love our spouse, using that word to describe the permanent bond of an exclusive relationship. But we also use the same word, love, to describe the less intense affection we have for other members of our family, or even for our friends. We even use the word "love" to describe our loyalty to a football team, or how much we enjoy pizza or golf or a certain brand of softdrink.

So, perhaps when Jesus says we are to love our enemies, he simply means that we are to appreciate their good points, or we are to recognize their worth as individuals. That doesn't mean we have to like them or have any warm feelings toward them, right?

Well, I'm sure we would like to believe all that. But here's the problem with whatever sort of spin we'd like to put on Jesus' clear commandment: the word Jesus uses to describe our interaction with our enemies, "agape," is the same word He uses to describe God's interaction with us. And that means that however we want to interpret the word "love" when it applies to our enemies is the same way we must interpret it when we speak of God's love for us. So, if we want our love for our enemies to be thin and watered-down, then that's the sort of love we should expect from God. But if we believe God's love for us is like a warm embrace, we simply cannot keep our enemies at arm's length. We have to love them the way we want God to love us.

"But preacher, do you mean to say that those mommas and daddies who sent their boys off to the War for Southern Independence had to love the Yankees? You mean that the folks sitting on their front porches and watching Grant's troops marching past after the Battle of Port Gibson should have invited them in for a glass of lemonade? I'm not telling you anything. Jesus says, "Love your enemies. Just as you want men to do to you, you do to them."

Preacher, do you mean to say that we should reach out to the communist vandals who are trying to destroy our largest cities? Should we embrace those who advocate for killing the unborn and defunding the police? I'm not telling you anything. Jesus says, "Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you."

Well, war is impersonal, and it is possible to forgive soldiers because, after all, they are only carrying out orders. And even politics can be seen as business, with different groups lobbying to accomplish their objectives. It's nothing personal. It's just war. It's just politics.

But what about our personal enemies? What about people who have cheated you? What about people who have harmed your business? What about people who have lied about you or spread vicious rumors about you? What about people who look down on you because of the amount of melanin you have in your skin? What about people who have abused you verbally or even physically?

What should the wife do whose husband beats her or neglects her? What should the husband do whose wife is unfaithful to him? What should the children do whose father abandons them? I'm not telling you anything. Jesus says, "Love your enemies and do good to those you hate you."

It's breathtaking. It's shocking. It's just not possible. I mean, we all know what it's like to be hurt – we have the emotional and sometimes the physical scars to prove it. And so we find love difficult even in the best of circumstances. We remain a bit defensive even with our closest friends, even with our husbands and wives – we don't reveal everything about ourselves, we don't open up too much even to those we're pretty sure love us for fear that we might be hurt again.

And whatever promises we have made in public, don't we really mean, "I will love you only until you break my heart, and then I will leave you." Don't we tend to love others only as long as they are loveable? But when we love like this, we are making it clear that our own heart is the most important thing to us. And that's not true love.

Of course, some of us are willing to go further. Some of us are committed to remain faithful to our promises, regardless of our feelings. Some of us say, "I will stick with you although you may break my heart. I will remain with you, even though I may not want to." This sort of stoicism may be closer to true love in outward appearance, but it is no more real, no more alive, no more true than the love that runs away when the going gets tough.

But in today's passage, Jesus calls us to an even higher, an even bolder standard of love. For not only does He call us away from an insistence on our rights. Not only does He call us away from loving only those we expect to love us in return. He calls us to a radical devotion to the welfare of others, no matter who they are, no matter how much they may have hurt us in the past. If we would follow Jesus, if we would be true children of God, we must love in the same way that God loves.

So how, in fact, does God love? Jesus gives us an illustration that we can all understand. God, He says, sends His life-giving sun and rain not only on the fields of the farmers and the pastures of the ranchers who love him. He gives the natural blessings of the world even to those who are unjust, even to those who are evil, even to those who mistreat others.

The God Who Is Love thus shows us the essentially disinterested character of love. For true love, as Paul says in our responsive reading from I Corinthians 13, is never proud or selfish, demanding its own way, insisting on its rights. True love does not hold grudges or keep a record of grievances. No, true love is always loyal, no matter the cost. True love always gives, expecting nothing in return.

That is true love. And that is the way God loves, isn't it? God loves those who do wrong. God loves those who don't deserve it. God loves the unlovable, saving those who are still dead in their sins. Yes, God's love is as unconditional as it is self-sacrificial. God's love is true.

And God would have to love us this way, wouldn't He? For who among us has not disappointed God? Who among us has not been unfaithful? Who has given God all the love He deserves? No, if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we are nothing more than ruthless rebels against His righteous rule. In rejecting God's authority, we are no better than the violent vandals wreaking havoc in our streets. In deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong, we are no better than the ignorant, intolerant mobs trying to cancel out all ideas with which they do not agree.

Indeed, we Christians have hurt God more severely than any of our enemies have ever hurt us. For we know Who Jesus is – the spotless, sinless Son of God in Whom His Father is well-pleased. We confess that He is the King of Kings and bow the knee before Him as the Lord of Lords. And yet we turn our backs on Him, doubting His power and love every time we give ourselves over to anxiety or fear. We deny His authority, crucifying Him anew every time we decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. Surely, we are the ones who are supremely unlovable. Surely, God would be justified in treating us the way we so often treat our enemies, despising us, rejecting us.

Yes, who would blame God for giving up on us? Who would blame God for loving us in the selfish way we so often love others? Who would blame God if He said of His church, "She has been unfaithful. I will leave her." Or who could blame God for settling for mere stoicism? Who would blame God for saying, "I will keep my promises to you, but I will not love you any more."

But in spite of all we have done and left undone, God's love is true. God says to His unlovable people, "I will love you although you have broken my heart on the cross. I will love you although you will break my heart again each time you sin. You are not lovely, but I have bought you with my lifeblood and you are mine. And I am yours, regardless of what you do to me. I will never leave you and I will never forsake you."

Yes, on the cross of Christ, God gave everything for us, holding nothing back. So, how can we possibly go on clinging to our rights? God poured out His unconditional love on His enemies, on a world full of spiteful sinners. How can we go on holding grudges, loving only those who love us in return?

But how can we truly love like God loves? How can we love the love of the cross? How can we really love our enemies? How can we be perfect in love, as our Heavenly Father is? We can't. Loving our enemies is simply beyond us. That's why Jesus says we must be children of God in order to do this. We can share and show God's disinterested, self-abandoning, self-sacrificing love only when we have died on the cross with Jesus. We can love our enemies only when we have died to ourselves and have been given a new life and adopted into God's family and filled with His Spirit.

And so let us pray for a full measure of Christ's gracious, loving Spirit to dwell within us each day. For only then we will love with God's love. Only then can we be gracious even to our enemies. Only then can we fearlessly open ourselves up to those who are evil, to those who have hurt us, to those who hate us. When Christ's Spirit of love dwells in us, then we will love as He loves, for we will be like Him.