

Love Your Enemies

Summary: Love you neighbour—your enemies also—what does “love” mean?—praying for your enemies—Paul’s advice.

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“But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”
(Matthew 5:44)

Agreed, then: we should love our neighbours and “turn the other cheek” and resist the impulse to pay someone who harms us back in his own coin, but does that involve loving him? Can we be expected to love to order?

Jesus's command to his disciples to love their enemies follows immediately on his words: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy’, (Matthew 5:43). “You shall love your neighbour” is a quotation from the Old Testament law. It is part of what Jesus elsewhere referred to as the second of the two great commandments: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

Jesus said that all the law and the prophets depend on this commandment, with its companion; “You shall love the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:5), which he called “the great and first commandment” (Matthew 22:36-40).

But the commandment does not in fact go on to say, “You shall hate your enemy?” However, if it is only our neighbours that we are to love, and the word “neighbours” be defined narrowly, then it might be argued that we are free to hate those who are not our neighbours. But Jesus said, “No, love your enemies as well as your neighbours.”

One difficulty lies in the sentimental associations that the word “love” has for many of us. The love of which both the law and the gospel speak is a very practical attitude, “Let us not love in word or speech [only] but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3: 18).

Love to one's neighbour is expressed in lending him a helping hand when that is what he needs. “Right,” says Jesus, “lend your enemy a helping hand when that is what he needs. Your feelings towards him are not the important thing.”

But if we think we should develop more Christian feelings towards an

enemy, Jesus points the way when he says, "Pray for those who persecute you" (or, as it is rendered in Luke 6:28, "Pray for those who abuse you"). Those who have put this injunction into practice assure us that persistence in prayer for someone whom we don't like, however much it goes against the grain to begin with, brings about a remarkable change in attitude.

Alexander Whyte quotes from an old diary the confessions of a man who had to share the same house and the same table with someone whom he found unendurable. He betook himself to prayer, until he was able to write, "Next morning I found it easy to be civil and even benevolent to my neighbour. And I felt at the Lord's Table today as if I would yet live to love that man. I feel sure I will."

The best way to destroy an enemy is to turn him into a friend.

Paul, who in this regard (as in so many others) reproduces the teaching of Jesus, sums it up by saying, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). He reinforces it by quoting from Proverbs 25:21-22, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head."

Whatever that proverb originally meant, Paul adapts it to his purpose by omitting the self-regarding clause which follows those he quotes, "and the Lord will reward you." In this new context the "burning coals" may mean the sense of shame which will be produced in the enemy, leading to a change of heart on his side too. But first do him a good turn, the feelings can be left to their own good time.