

All You Need Is Love (Week 6) - Love your Enemies Yesterday's Sermon Summary



1. On the last Sunday of our series that sought to paint the big picture of Christian love, we left the "love letter" of the New Testament (1st John) and moved to the last paragraph of the first chapter of Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount" - [The Gospel of Matthew 5.38-48](#). Without this text, a discussion of Christian love is incomplete. And these words call Jesus' followers far beyond what's ordinary, acceptable, and allowable; they are meant to destabilize and unsettle us.
2. First, it's important to place in their historical context the phrases and examples used by Jesus. An "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth," known as *lex talionis*, was a common legal and moral principle across the ancient world. It was meant to limit retaliation and retribution to a proportional response (so no burning down a town because someone in it stole your cow).
3. To "strike a right cheek" was a public insult meant to shame and dishonor; it was also often the act of a superior to an inferior (master to slave, boss to employee, etc.). No one in the ancient world was really suing for a shirt and coat, but Jesus uses this as an example of how the poor or day workers were often extorted by lenders into oblivion. After all, if you have no shirt or coat, you either left standing there in your underwear or nothing at all.
4. The legal limit a Roman soldier could force a resident of an occupied land to carry his equipment was one mile, but this limit was often ignored. Last, "love your neighbor and hate your enemy" was a common proverb, first taught to children, in Jesus' locale. Jesus intentionally counteracts it by setting a far higher bar for His disciples.
5. While none of us today likely think of having "enemies," who in your life or world might fit into the categories Jesus is describing? First, recognize that while these are personal and interpersonal illustrations, they also intentionally tap into political, cultural, and socioeconomic divides and injustices. To find your "enemies," ask yourself these questions: a) Who feels justified in their negative feelings about or actions toward you?; b) Who seeks to insult, shame, or demean you?; c) Who tries to misuse their influence, power, or authority toward you so that they can take advantage of you?; d) Who doesn't like you, and moreover, who don't you like?
6. As we reflect on this astonishing, transformative teaching on love, first realize that loving an enemy doesn't mean that we like them or what they might be doing. Likewise, it doesn't mean that we don't feel deep anger. But love means that we refuse to let our dislike or rage turn us into what we dislike, that is, we refuse to become like our enemies.

7. Thus, in his book on the Sermon on the Mount Father Richard Rohr describes how this command to love our enemies is as much for our protection as it is theirs. It forces us to widen our love in a way that we might not naturally do on our own. It also frees our own hearts from the bondage of hate, bitterness, revenge, etc. And those attitudes, Father Rohr notes, might well be our real enemy.

8. Second, to love our enemy is not to be weak nor to play the victim. No, it is an act of redemptive strength that invites enemies to reconsider, renounce, and redirect. To love our enemies is to preserve both our own agency and dignity and theirs. Each of Jesus' examples in Matt. 5.38-48 illustrate this directly: e.g., when you stand your ground and turn your second cheek toward an enemy instead fleeing or lashing out, your enemy is surprised and in that moment can choose differently. (Jesus' example of suing someone out of all of their clothes is an even funnier example of this same principle.)

9. Third, to love our enemies is to look beyond and beneath their actions and words. Famously, Martin Luther King Jr. taught that "When we look beneath the surface, beneath the impulsive evil deed, we see within our enemy-neighbor a measure of goodness and know that the viciousness and evilness of his acts are not quite representative of all that he is. We see him in a new light. We recognize that his hate grows out of fear, pride, ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding, but in spite of this, we know God's image is ineffably etched in his being."

10. In sum, what Jesus knew - and so many more following after Him for 2000 years - is that only love has the power to turn an enemy into a friend. And if "loving your enemies" seems too daunting or surreal, remember what one New Testament scholar suggests - just start with one enemy...ask God to show which specific enemy in your life you should try to love with purpose, intentionality, and resolve...and who knows what happens next.

Loving Your Enemies

- Explore Martin Luther King Jr.'s extraordinary teaching on "loving your enemies" (the 2nd link is to an audio clip of one of his sermons): ["Loving Your Enemies," Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church](#) and [Martin Luther King: Love Your Enemies](#)

- Valarie Kaur is a lawyer, activist, and documentary filmmaker, and central to her work is "revolutionary love" that love enemies. The first link is to her TED Talk, the second is to her first book, and the third is to her organization:

- [3 lessons of revolutionary love in a time of rage](#)
- [See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love \(One World Essentials\)](#)
- [Home - The Revolutionary Love Project](#)

- Read the inspiring story of Ann Atwater and C. P. Ellis, two "enemies" who became friends during the school desegregation deliberation in Durham, NC, in 1971: [Breaking Isolation](#)

- And here are a few short devotionals on "loving your enemies" to scatter throughout your week:

- [So That - United Church of Christ](#)
- [Let's Skip That One - United Church of Christ Let's Skip That One](#)
- [You're Braver than You Believe - United Church of Christ](#)

Want to Learn More about Christian Love?

Here are some recommended resources for those who want to keep going on their journey into greater, better Christian love...each of these were used or cited during our sermon series:

- A great overview of Christian love from a United Methodist pastor: [Reckless Love: Jesus' Call to Love Our Neighbor: Berlin, Tom](#)
- An extraordinary little book from David Benner that pieces together a) believing that God is love, b) experiencing God as love, c) letting that love flow out of you to others, and then d) having love become the centerpiece of your life: [Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality \(The Spiritual Journey\)](#)
- From a professor at Duke Divinity School, this very readable book endeavors to show that love is at the center of the whole Bible and each key facet of Christian belief, from sin to salvation and beyond: [Way of Love: Recovering the Heart of Christianity: Wirzba, Norman, Bass, Diana Butler](#)
- A great book that weaves together the best modern psychology and sociology has to offer about how we can "love our neighbors" better: [Love Your Neighbor: How Psychology Can Enliven Faith and Transform Community: Douglass, Katherine M., Tausen, Brittany M., Gilliard, Dominique DuBois](#)
- From an esteemed Christian counselor, this gets into the brass tacks of loving people well: [Loving People: How to Love and Be Loved: Townsend, John](#)