

PRAYING FOR THE PEOPLE WE DON'T LIKE**Leviticus 19:9-18; Matthew 5:43-48****(Read Matthew 5:43-48)****Intro:** (Tell about the painting customer that refused to pay me for added work)

I have rarely have had anyone who could be considered an enemy. I trend way in the other direction – I want to love everyone and be loved by everyone. But these folks crushed my naiveté and shattered my rose colored glasses. I was deeply hurt.

I still feel a twinge of anger when I think about it.

I really have had to work to love them the way God wants me too. I didn't like them 46 years ago and if I prayed for them it wasn't that God would prosper them but that, maybe, he would zap them – just a little bit. It's hard to pray for people we don't like. But God tells us in Leviticus 19:18 to *love your neighbor as yourself*. then he ices the cake with *I AM the Lord*. Loving your neighbor isn't a nice suggestion – it's the word of God himself.

But some would retort, and correctly, that in Leviticus, it was understood that this instruction applied specifically to fellow members of the Israelite community. This meant that a foreigner or a Gentile – someone not Jewish, was exempt from this directive. In other words, even a “godly” person could hate on a non-godly person with reckless abandon.

Jesus changed that. If God ever meant that in the first place, and if Jesus came to change not one dot of the i or one cross of a t, it would mean that he did not, then Jesus's teaching to *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* Matthew 5:44 was the final word on what his Father laid down in the Old Testament.

But that doesn't mean it's easy.

In fact, it's really, really hard. Some people make it really easy to despise them – so to do the opposite it that much more difficult. But if Jesus said it, we need to do it. If we are to be like Jesus who looked down from the Cross and prayed to his Father, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” Luke 23:34, then we need to pray for those who would crucify us literally or figuratively. It's what we are called to do as the people of God.

So how? Here are some instructions from our texts . . .

Treat everyone, even those who are enemies, the way God treats you

- Briefly recall the directions from what Carolyn read to us.
 - Make sure you provide for the poor **AND** the foreigner. Leave crops for them to glean.
 - Live by the Ten Commandments and then he gives a brief review of them
 - Don't steal
 - Don't lie
 - Don't swear falsely
 - Don't defraud or rob your neighbor – for paint jobs or anything else
 - Don't harass the handicapped
 - Don't pervert justice
 - Don't show favoritism to anyone – poor or rich – they are the same in God's eyes and should be in ours too.
 - Don't spread slander
 - Don't put others in danger
 - Don't HATE!
 - Don't seek revenge or bear a grudge
 - In fact, love your neighbor as yourself! Ronald Clements writes, “*A healthy concern for oneself and one's own well-being is accepted as both natural and God implanted. What requires special, divine, admonition is the recognition that other persons are also God's creatures, and are entitled to the same care and consideration.*”
- This is how God treats you – treat others the same way.
- Jesus put it like this . . .

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

- Piece a cake, right? NOT! R. T. France lays it out: *“In these verses the paradoxical values of the Kingdom of heaven reach their climax in what is virtually an oxymoron: love your enemies; an enemy is, by definition, not loved. Perhaps even more than turning the other cheek, this command has attracted the incredulity, and often the scorn of many interpreters, as a utopian policy, which makes no sense in a world characterized by conflict and self-interest.”*
- Well, it might seem utopian but Jesus said it and that means we do it – or at least give it our best try and we must keep trying. But I know you’re thinking, as I do, “How do we reach perfection when only Jesus achieved that?” Here is R. E. Nixon’s thinking on that, *“The disciple does extra in response to the God who gives extra far beyond deserts. The perfection demanded springs from this relationship which revolutionizes attitudes. It is a perfection which is unattainable and therefore continually to be aimed at.”* We keep at it. (Could it be like Ken Abel’s quest for the perfect Mexican restaurant? He knew he would never find perfection so he knew his question would be long and tasty)
- So it doesn’t matter if loving and praying for our enemies is unnatural and impractical, because, humanly speaking, it is. It’s what God calls us to do because he calls us to holiness which is often impractical and unnatural. The purpose of our passage, and indeed the whole Sermon on the Mount, from which our text is taken, has not been to provide a suitable ethic for getting along alright in the world, but to challenge those who have accepted the demands of the Kingdom of heaven to live up to their commitment by being different from other people. We need to live on a different level from ordinary decent people. This is not because we’re better than them, but because our standards of conduct are what God requires of us and what our heavenly Father desires for us. So, we do what he asks, rather than what everybody else is doing.

It comes down to love

- To pray for people we don’t like means we need to love them and a lotta people are really hard to love. R. E. Nixon puts it this way: *“The law only commanded love to the neighbor in Leviticus 19:18. Sectarian groups in particular, extended this to hatred of those who did not belong to the righteous. The law in fact provided for kindness to enemies such as what we find in Exodus 23:4-9. Persecutors are the most difficult enemies to love. Prayer is an essential step towards loving them.”*
- Jesus was speaking to people who had been under the teaching of the Pharisees who knew the scriptures inside and out. They had studied the Bible and their interpretation was like that of the Essenes who were the best of the best who said the people of God were to love all the sons of light, and hate all the sons of darkness. That made it seem almost biblical to hate. Except that’s not what the author of the Bible was saying. He was sitting here on a mountain side and teaching the opposite.
- Suzanne de Dietrich says this, *“To hatred, Jesus offers the opposite which is love and prayer for persecutors, for by these ways, men become the sons of their Father who is in heaven. This phrase gives us the key to the whole passage, indeed to the entire discourse: the real question is whether our deportment carries the mark of our divine sonship, or whether it is only like that of the tax collectors and Gentiles. That is, those who do not know the miracle of being loved by God.”* In other words, are we going to act like people of the world who don’t know and don’t realize how much God loves them, or are we going to show them God’s love by loving them the way God does?
- Hatred isn’t a biblical concept – that means people of the book, and that’s what we are, do not hate.
- G. Campbell Morgan is so eloquent on this. Notice how, even though he is preaching on Matthew 5 from the Sermon on the Mount he addresses those commandments found in the Leviticus 19 passage. Listen closely, he writes, *“Finally, he says, love not your friends only, but your enemies. How does this end? You shall be perfect. And that is not the end of the Sermon on the Mount. There is a great deal more to be said after that. That commandment does not refer to anything except that which is set in close relation. Love your enemies, and so be like your Father. This is the ethic only, not the dynamic. Presently we shall have to say, be like your father, and so love your enemies. For the moment. Love is the law, the rule, the regulation, the principal of life that crowns everything. Go back over all of chapter 5 and you will find it. If you love, you will never be angry, or call your brother Raca, or call him fool. If you love, there will be no breaking down of the holy enclosure of the marriage relationship, and the family circle. If you really*

love you will tell the truth, for a liar cannot love. If you love, as we have seen, justice will always be satisfied. Love is everything. And so the whole law is fulfilled in one word. Love.

- That gives me goosebumps! John Lennon sang “*All you need is love.*” and he was right but I’m doubting he knew the love Jesus was talking about. England Dan and John Ford Coley sang *Light of the world, shine on me, love is the answer* and I hope they really knew the light of the world.
- Love IS the answer

Conclusion: That’s how we pray for those people we don’t like. We love them and then we can pray for them. What if they don’t like us anyway? That’s expected. It is expected that we will be persecuted and Jesus is getting us ready for it. Love your enemy and love the one who persecutes you.

Without thinking ourselves higher or better than others we need to operate on a higher plane at a level we reach not by our own efforts but by the love of Jesus. That is what is required of the people of God. Amen.