

Matthew 5:38-48

Love your enemies

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Nothing is more counter-culture than the Sermon on the Mount. If you ever wondered about that, here is your proof.

We might begin by asking Jesus did you really mean that? Seriously? I am to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, offer my coat, and love my enemies, pray for those who harm me? And finally, be perfect. Really?

We need to confess at the beginning that this is impossible. I think it's also good to admit what is impossible has been practiced by Christians from the beginning. It's this remarkable paradox that is at the heart of being a Christian. Yes, it's impossible. And yes, we walk by faith in this impossible way, entrusting our lives to one who gives us grace to do what is beyond imagination. Well then what do we do with this teaching?

Someone pointed the first option is to say no; Jesus doesn't mean us to take it seriously. Those who argue this way say the same thing about virtually the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. None of it is to be taken seriously. It's only intent is to drive us to acknowledge our failure and accept the grace of God for sinners. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor, confronted this attitude when he witnessed the German church sliding into complacency with the status quo. Bonhoeffer called it *cheap* grace, that knows nothing of the real cost of being a practicing Christian. It's perilous to not take it seriously.

The second option is also perilous. That is to take these teachings **too** seriously. That is to fall into the opposite trap of believing that with just enough will power and spiritual grit, you can do anything - even overcome sin enough to love your enemy, turn the other cheek and give everything away. I have to admit that this option, which goes all the way back to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, is the one most seductive whether from the liberal or conservative spectrum. In every generation it returns. Each time you turn Jesus' teachings into a self-help program that only requires you to summon up the grit to do it, you fall prey to an ancient error that always lead to burnout and the de-facto dismissal of God. If we can do it, who needs God?

Is there is a way forward? Remember Jesus calls his followers the Salt of the Earth and the Light of World. That means the way forward is to "be who you are": salt that enriches the earth and all people and light that bring hope to the darkest places.

David Lose, who is the President of Lutheran Seminary, deepens this notion of being who you are as a follower of Jesus. He reminds us that "the word we translate "perfect" is actually the Greek word *telos* and implies less a moral perfection than it does reaching one's intended outcome. The *telos* of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach its target. The *telos* of a peach

tree is to yield peaches. Which means that we might translate this passage more loosely to mean, "Be the person and community God created you to be, just as God is the One God is supposed to be."

**In other words: be who you are: the blessed, beloved salt of the earth, light of the world, followers of Jesus. This is your purpose, your end point. Walk in this way.**

When you are being who you are as God's beloved, the question of impossibility becomes irrelevant. Who says it's impossible to love someone who hates you? You just walk in the way, like Rosa Parks who did what appeared to the world to be impossible for decades. You just walk in the impossible way, like John Lewis and Martin Luther King, Jr., who endured everything this world could give and yet continued to walk in the way of love and non-violence against their enemies. They knew it was impossible, but it didn't matter because they also knew the one in whom they believed and who called them the beloved community. This is always the way it is when we walk by faith and not by sight. Peter joyfully stepped out of the boat into the impossible, walking on water, until he noticed he was doing the impossible. Then he began to sink. Prior to that, he was walking in faith toward the Lord Jesus, doing the impossible. This is how it works.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado once said, "there is no way, you make the way by walking." We walk one step at a time and the path appears. And David Lose reminds us: Martin Luther once said that the Christian life is not about arriving but always about becoming.

How to begin? One small impossible step at a time. Every Tuesday the Daily Prayer book I follow calls us to "Pray for those from whom you are estranged." It's a weekly reminder to do just that. Someone once advised me to pray every day for two for the person with whom I was in conflict – maybe not my enemy, but there was still enmity. It's a remarkable spiritual practice this praying for your enemies because it protects your own heart from becoming what you despise. So there may be some step you can step walking in this way of Jesus.

**What strikes me powerfully is that the love of enemies that Jesus taught is precisely the practice that God enacted toward us.** Jesus, whom the Father called his beloved Son, suffered the full force of the enmity of the world. The One who is love kept on loving even when he was abused, rejected and crucified. Luke tells us that on his cross Jesus says "Father, Forgive them." In the letters of Peter, which the weekly bible study focused on this past week, we are reminded "that when they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate." Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, says "Here is divine love that cannot be defeated by violence: we do our worst, and we still fail to put God off. We reject, exclude and murder the one who bears the love of God in his words and work, and that love continues to do exactly what it always did. ... God in Jesus gently but firmly always pushes back, doing exactly what he always did: loving, forgiving, healing." (The Sign and the Sacrifice: The Meaning of the Cross and Resurrection. Rowan Williams. Page 8)

Because of God's love for us that has claimed us, named us and called us we who follow Jesus can walk in his way. ***Of course, it's impossible.*** But that didn't stop God from loving us, and it need not stop the followers of Jesus either.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.