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“LOVE YOUR ENEMIES”

Bobby Liddell

On the mount, Jesus preached a magnificent sermon, in which He proclaimed the characteristics of the citizens of His kingdom (Mat. 5-7). In it, He taught His disciples to love their enemies (Mat. 5:43-48).

“Ye Have Heard”

Jesus addressed the Jews' misunderstanding and misapplication of God's instruction, which derived from what they had “heard” (Mat. 5:20, 43); that is, “hate thine enemy.” The Jews' misconception, held in spite of God's revealed will to the contrary, validated, to them, their ungodly attitudes and actions toward those outside their sphere of acceptance. Since the Jews considered all Gentiles, and even some of their own nation, as enemies (cf. 1 The. 2:14-16; Acts 10:34-11:18; John 4:9), they felt no responsibility to show love to anyone other than their fellow Jews, or, more specifically and exclusively, other than their friends. Such “love” was partial, imperfect, and in contrast to God's love.

“Love Thy Neighbor”

The word neighbor (Mat. 5:43) can indicate one who is near, or a fellow man in general; thus, one with whom there is some common bond. A “certain lawyer;” “willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:25-29). Jesus taught him about a Samaritan's love (v. 27), compassion (v. 33), and mercy (v. 37), as he made the point that everyone is our neighbor.

Loving one close to us should be easy, and hating an enemy also seems natural to the carnal, worldly man. The Word from God, concerning love, included those near (cf. Lev. 19:18), but also those with whom the Jews perceived little, or no, connection, and to whom they felt they could legitimately deny any obligation (even Edomites and Egyptians [Deu. 23:7]). Jesus affirmed the common practice of the Jews was according to what they had heard, and thus far, the Jews would have been in complete agreement with Him.

“But I Say Unto You”

The Word who became flesh (John 1:1-14) did not come down from Heaven to declare as acceptable man's misconceptions, but to do the will of the Father (John 6:38; 9:4), and to show man the way of light and life (10:10). He taught men a better way, as He called them from sin to salvation, from sorrow to joy, and from darkness to light. Those who would be the “salt of the earth,” and the “light of the world,” must do and teach the commandments, and must be more and do more than (that is, must “exceed” in righteousness) the scribes and Pharisees (Mat. 5:13-16, 19, 21).

“But I say unto you,” emphasized the significance of what Jesus said, contrasted with what men said. We must choose whether we will listen to the “King of kings, and Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15; Luke 6:46), to the Devil (cf. Gen. 3:4-5; John 8:44), or to mere, mortal men (Mark 6:3; Mat. 15:9). Some would rather hear what men say, whether in words of condemnation of the Savior (Mark 15:13-14), or in praise of themselves (John 12:42-43), than to hear the words of Jesus. Whether we choose to listen to them, or not, the words of Christ will be that by which we are judged (John 12:48).

“Love Your Enemies”

Jesus said, “Love your enemies” (Mat. 5:44). The love Jesus commands is not something we are to keep only to ourselves and a select few. The love we are to have for our enemies is not a reaction, in kind, to their attitudes toward us (i.e., reciprocation [cf. 1 John 4:19]), but is a determined, obedient action, in keeping with the Lord's command, in order to be like the Father; and in spite of the hatred of our enemies for us. As Bill Wheeler wrote: “Love does not seek a limit. It seeks outlets. Loving enemies examines our responsibilities and does not anticipate an enemy's reactions.”

“Your enemies” makes it personal. Jesus did not command men to love the enemies of their enemies, which would be far easier; but for each to love his own enemies. Who is an enemy? An enemy is one who is an antagonist or foe, whether one who actively hates us, or who is detestable in a passive sense. How are we to feel and act toward our enemies? Eldred Stevens stated: “We are all too familiar with the natural impulses involved. When someone hits you – you strike back, and harder! For even a slight injury, the injured must have his revenge. There is a tendency to wrath, anger, retribution, retaliation.”² Such is not the way of Jesus! What a great example He set in loving His enemies.

“Bless Them That Curse You”

Jesus said, we are to love our enemies, which is difficult enough, but then, He said, “Bless them.” Rather than denouncing with derogative speech, praise them. The worldly response would be to be hateful and vindictive, but we are called to a higher life (1 Pet. 3:9), and to a different spirit (Rom. 12:14-21).

An amazing statement about our Lord occurs in 1 Peter 2:19-24. He left us “an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously;” Especially noteworthy is this: “Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again.” When Christ was reproached and vilified, He did not reply with railing. Was He a coward because He did not stoop to the level of angry, abusive accusers? No. He exercised self-control, and answered not, when an answer would have done no good. Rather, He allowed His adversaries to show what, and who, they really were, as they contradicted and refuted themselves (Mark 15:55-57). Was He sinfully silent because He did not respond in kind to the wickedness of their deceitful trickery? No. “Neither was guile found in His mouth.” As our example (1 Pet. 2:21), Christ, who could have answered from omniscience, sometimes did not answer His accusers at all (Isa. 53:7; Mat. 27:12, 14; John 19:9; Mark 15:5). Instead, He prayed for, desired the salvation of, did good to, suffered at the hands of, and died for his enemies.

Paul wrote, by inspiration, that we are not to have fellowship with a brother who is a “railer” (1 Cor. 5:11). Some will embrace a brother who is a railer, and even exalt him. Nonetheless, in their attempt to destroy others, such railers unwittingly make possible, for their intended victims, a blessing.

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Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you (Mat. 5:11-12).

Whom should we bless? Only those who bless us? Only those who are agreeable, or at least, who are not disagreeable? The Lord said we are to bless those who would pronounce a curse upon us, those who would invoke our demise, or destruction, those who would “curse” us! This is the acid test of self-denial, self-emptying submission to the will of the Lord (Rom. 6:16-18). Yet, there is more: “Do good to them that hate you.”

“Do Good To Them That Hate You”

Doing good means: to cause to come about that which is morally good. Doing good requires doing something, for doing nothing is not doing good. David described the base devices of sinful enemies who sought information so they could spread an evil report. Sadly, these enemies used to be his “own familiar friend(s).”

Mine enemies speak evil of me. When shall he die, and his name perish? And if he come to see me, he speaketh vanity: his heart gathereth iniquity to itself; when he goeth abroad, he telleth it. All that hate me whisper together against me: against me do they devise my hurt. An evil disease, say they, cleaveth fast unto him: and now that he lieth he shall rise up no more. Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me (Psa. 41:5-9).

Again, the question is: “To whom are we to do good?” To our friends only? No, to those who are like the ones described in Psalm 41, full of hatred toward us, and who actively display their loathing of us; to those who do all they can, without regard to the principles of courtesy, integrity, ethics, and honesty, to destroy us. Instead of our seeking to retaliate, to bring injury, or to cause to stumble, we are to do good (Pro. 25:21-22). What a challenge! What a test of faith! What an opportunity!

We cannot force others to love us, or not to hate us, but we can love them. Moreover, we can determine not to allow their enmity to rob us of our happiness, or salvation. Wheeler wrote: “We often think of loving an enemy as a puzzle to be solved, but this is a way of life to be emulated.”¹³

“Pray For Them”

“And,” there is still more. We are to make prayers to God on their behalf—not spiteful, angry, hateful prayers, or calling down fire from heaven upon them (Luke 9:54), but earnest supplications for the very ones who hate and despise us. We ought to pray to God about them, which may not be as difficult, but also pray for them—pointedly and pleadingly. We are to pray for those who maliciously allege, falsely accuse, hatefully slander, and knowingly bear false witness in an attempt to bring harm to us, to ruin our reputations, to encourage others to shun us, or who encourage others to join with them in their dishonest, unethical denunciations and persecutions of us. “You” is in the objective case, meaning that “you” are the object of their hatred and despite. With such a weighty charge upon us, we could surely use a good example of one who did as Jesus here commands.

Of Stephen, who was “full of faith and power;” and, “did great wonders and miracles among the people” (Acts 6:8), Luke wrote that wicked men:

...were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake... (and) suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the

customs which Moses delivered us. And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. Then said the high priest, Are these things so? (Acts 6:10-7:1).

After Stephen’s scriptural, stirring, and straightforward sermon:

They were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul (Acts 7:54-48).

While we might expect such hate-filled actions by Stephen’s attackers, the most remarkable response recorded for our instruction and example, follows.

And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:59-60).

“Lay not this sin to their charge” is hardly the response we would think forthcoming from one being stoned to death by vile men, ungodly liars, and their false witnesses, but it was Stephen’s response. This is the very kind of response Jesus demonstrated, and the response that He taught we should have.

“That...Persecute You”

“And” our enemies, whom we are to love, to whom we are to do good, and for whom we are to pray, are those who persecute us (1 Pet. 4:12-16). Persecute comes from a word which indicates pursuit. Often, enemies are relentless in their attacks, becoming obsessed in their pursuits (cf. 1 Sam. 23:25). Why would one persecute another? Hateful attacks may be the result of misguided conscience, such as in the case of Paul (Acts 8:1-3; Acts 23:1; but note also Gal. 1:23; 2 Cor. 11:23-33). Persecution, oftentimes, is a vain attempt to vindicate oneself, to prove a point or a position, to divert attention from one’s own guilt, to reclaim a position, or standing, which he has lost, to punish a perceived detractor, to boost one’s own wounded ego, or is just a sad example of one’s uncontrolled anger and ungodly malice.

Many attacks are nothing more than calculated displays designed to parade the “strong stand” one is taking (supposedly) “for the Truth.” The goal some seek to accomplish is of such importance to them, that they can with assumed impunity, do wrong to achieve it. Sadly, others, perceiving an opportunity to make a name, or to secure an invitation, jump on the bandwagon, and ignorantly serve evil purposes. Such attacks may deceive the uninformed, arouse unfounded fears, and lead astray the gullible, but discerning brethren know that one does not prove his point just because of his persistence. In other words, the one who shouts longest and loudest does not, by such conduct, convince the wise. Even so, we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Wheeler noted: “When one doesn’t love, he finds an excuse; when he loves, he finds a way.”¹⁴

“Children Of Your Father”

Why should we love our enemies and do good to them? “That,” so that; thus, by one’s conduct accomplishing the intended objective, “ye may be the children of your Father” (Mat. 5:45). If we would be (become) the children (sons) of God, we must conduct ourselves as His children. Of whom should we desire to be children? Of the Father who is “in” (that is, He is located there) “heaven.” God’s dwelling place is above, not on the earth; therefore, He is the one called our Heavenly Father (as different from our earthly fathers).

Attitudes and actions demonstrate whose children we are (cf. John 8:33-44), and if we are obedient to our father, or not. As children of God, we must conduct ourselves properly, in accordance with the commands of our Father, even toward our enemies. Why? Because the Father, the Creator, causes the rising of the sun, supplying the life-sustaining light upon, or over, the evil, those who are wicked and whose influences are harmful, AND also upon the good, those who do well and whose influences are beneficial. Likewise, the Father, whose children we ought to be, sends rain, another essential element of life, upon the just, those who, in holiness, exercise righteousness, AND upon the unjust, the unholy and unrighteous, whose opposition to good is without ethical or moral boundaries (Mat. 5:45).

God’s love is impartial. So must our love be. He “so loved” the world that He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16)! His Son, so loved that He died for us—while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8-9; cf. Acts 2:22-23)! Upon the cross, as His life was passing from Him, Jesus said, of His enemies: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). This is the kind of love we are to have—toward our enemies.

“More Than...The Publicans”

If our reason for loving others is only because they love us, then what reward do we have? “Do not even the publicans the same?” The Jews despised the publicans because of their perception of the publicans as greedy, self-serving traitors who abused the powers given them (or bought) from the Roman government to exact taxes. By “the same,” Jesus shows that even the hated publicans, who lacked compassion, or even concern, for the plight of the Jewish subjects of Rome, would love those who loved them. Additionally, Jesus brings up another question: “And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?” “If” they greeted warmly; such as, with an embrace, only those who were brethren (literally, those who came from the same womb, but used figuratively of those with whom they had a close relationship), those alone, and no other; in what way did they exceed, in quantity or quality, what others did? Even the detested tax collectors would do the same (Mat. 5:47).

“Be Ye Therefore Perfect”

God’s children are to rise above the level of hate given by enemies, as well as the level of love extended by publicans. Thus, Jesus concluded, as a consequence of correct attitudes and actions, as described above, that we would be “perfect,” fully-grown, mature, or complete, even as the Heavenly Father lacks nothing (Mat. 5:48). Unlike those who love their friends, or those who reciprocate love to them, followers of Christ and children of God are to have perfect love—not for friends only, but even for enemies. Is the opportunity to achieve maturity (perfection) a blessing? Or, should we curse God that enemies persecute us (cf. Acts 16:22-25). Having enemies can help us to learn to trust God more, and to draw closer to Him (Heb. 12:1-15; Rom. 8:35-39; Psa. 56). Oppressive enemies, fighting against us, wresting our words, thinking evil against us, hide, and lie in wait for our souls. What shall we do? “In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me” (Psa. 56:11). God will deliver us.

Conclusion

In the end, when enemies have falsely condemned us, wrongly convicted us, and have done all they can to carry out our execution, this truth still stands: “The Lord knoweth them that are his” (2 Tim. 2:19). The benefits of loving our enemies are many. There is benefit to us, for we become more like the Father. There is benefit to our fellowman as we show the world, and our enemies, the true, impartial, agape love of God. There is benefit to the church, the beautiful bride of Christ, to which He is married (Eph. 5:23ff), the body of Christ, for which Christ died (Acts 20:28), and of which we, as Christians, are members (Col. 1:18; 1 Cor. 12:20).

Endnotes

1. Bill Wheeler; “Loving Your Enemies;” IN: Love One Another, ed. Neale Pryor (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation Pub. House, 1981), p. 87.
2. Eldred Stevens, The Sermon On The Mount (Dallas, TX: Eldred Stevens Pub., 1982), p. 119.
3. Wheeler, p. 87.
4. Ibid.

LETTERS

We happily received this letter that is of encouragement to the School, but also of encouragement to those who support this work (Editor).

“Faculty and Staff of MSOP:

In July we hired _____, an MSOP graduate, to come and preach for us here in _____. We didn’t really know what to expect, because we had never hired someone from there before.

I would just like to thank you and congratulate you on the kind of preacher you have prepared for us. Even though _____ is young, he is doing an outstanding job and has a great future in ministry for the Lord’s church.

Thank you, bless you, and may the Lord increase your ability to continue what you are doing.

_____ for the elders”

We are also thankful to have received this letter from a graduate.

“Dear brethren,

As a graduate of this fine school it is with a soul full of appreciation that I wish to express my gratitude to Memphis School of Preaching, Forest Hill Church of Christ, and all the brethren that made my biblical studies in Memphis possible. Those were two years of arduous learning and, frankly, there were times when I felt I was at my wits’ end. However, with kind encouragement from the faculty and other students I pressed on and the strenuous effort paid off in due time. Only now, in retrospective, I can truly appreciate all the demands that the teachers made upon us. I consider those two years at the school as pivotal in my life. It has been five years since we graduated and my wife and I left for our homeland, Ukraine, nevertheless, I still draw upon the priceless wealth of knowledge with which I was generously supplied within the halls of this excellent biblical institution. The education that I received at MSOP was immediately put to service as my preaching job in the city of Horlivka started. We, indeed, started with very humble beginnings – at the outset, it was only I and Natasha that our congregation consisted of. Yet, nothing daunted, we continued, prayerfully, and soon Natasha’s mother was added to our small church.

In a few months we were able to locate a facility that good brethren from Beech Hill congregation helped to purchase and which served both as a meeting place and our residence. From then on, the Lord was adding to our congregation continually. Last year our older son Daniel, to our unbounded joy, resolved to put on Christ and I had the honor to immerse him personally. Currently, we have eighteen active members and five of those are men. In November we are seriously planning an evangelical outreach whereupon all of our members intend to participate.

At the time when we were accepted at MSOP the preaching schools in our country were “scarcer than hen’s teeth.” However, in the recent years there has been a good crop of schools that teach to preach the gospel to the lost world. Still, I would vouch that, probably, none of them compares to MSOP in its depth and width of theoretical and practical appliance of the Word of God. May God bless all of you in this noble and indispensable task.

Victor (Parakhin), Natasha and family in Christ in the city of Horlivka”

DEWEY MEDLIN, 1973 GRADUATE, HAS DIED

Dewey Medlin and his faithful wife, Dot, were tireless workers in the kingdom of God and two of the most helpful people I have known. Unfortunately, brother Medlin was ill for a long period and his service to the Lord was short-circuited.

Brother Dewey was a “wrap-around” student, having started in January 1972 and finishing in January 1974. When I came in August 1973 he was one of my classmates. How helpful he was to this ignorant, first-year, student. He gave me hints on how to study and how to take notes. Brother Medlin was very humble, yet he never wavered when defending the truth and he taught me, by his example, to try and do the same.

I remember, especially, his leading “I’ll Be A Friend To Jesus” in class and how his voice could hit those high notes which effort sent chills up and down my spine. I remember that he also was a good carpenter and years later he described a house he and Dot built all by themselves.

Dot, I will miss him. Everyone who knew him has told me the same. The prayers here are for you, because I just know that Dewey is in the presence of the one he loved – Jesus. Keith A. Mosher, Sr.