

Love Your Enemies

JESUS' COMMAND TO LOVE OUR ENEMIES IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FULFILL ON OUR OWN. WE CAN DO IT ONLY WITH THE LOVE OF GOD THAT IS GIVEN US BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.

When I was in a concentration camp during World War II, we had to stand every day for two or three hours for roll call, often in the icy-cold wind. Once a woman guard used these hours to demonstrate her cruelty. I could hardly bear to see and hear what happened in front of me.

Suddenly a skylark started to sing high in the sky. We all looked up, and when I looked to the sky and listened to its song, I looked still higher and thought of Psalm 103:11: "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him" (RSV).

Instantly I saw that this love of God was a greater reality than the cruelty I experienced myself and saw around me. "Oh the love of God, how deep and great, far deeper than man's deepest hate."

In His mercy, God sent that skylark every day for three weeks, just at the time of roll call, to give us an opportunity to turn away our eyes from the cruelty of men to the ocean of His love.

God's love is both a protection and a weapon. It guards us against impatience, against bitterness, against gloating. It is also a very strong weapon in the battle to win souls, for it never gives in.

It looks for a way of being constructive, it is glad when truth prevails. Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope: It can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that stands when all else has

fallen (see 1 Cor. 13).

How do we get that strong love? The Holy Spirit is the one who gives it to us (see Rom. 5:5).

We must look to Him particularly when we are faced with the challenge of loving our enemies. Jesus commanded His disciples, “‘Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you’” (Matt. 5:44, NKJV).

But this is impossible unless God Himself gives us the love that He demands from us.

In Africa I visited the cell of a young man who was sentenced to death. His hands were chained, and his dark skin had many red wounds, caused by lashes.

The cell was absolutely empty; only a plank on the floor, and high up in the wall a very little window. The prisoner looked very healthy and strong. The tragedy that this man had to die overwhelmed me.

I sat down beside him and prayed for a word from the Lord. I asked, “Have you ever heard of the cross of Jesus Christ, where He carried the sins of the whole world—also your sins?”

He nodded.

“Do you believe in Jesus Christ, that He will be your Saviour too?”

“Yes, I love Him, but I have not always been faithful. Politics has taken up my time and attention completely, but now I have brought all my sins to Jesus. He has forgiven me. If I should live any longer, then I will serve Him with all my life.”

“Have you forgiven the people who have brought you here, who will have your death on their conscience?”

"No, I hate them."

"I can understand that. I will tell you one of my experiences.

"During the war in Holland, I helped to save Jewish people because Hitler wanted to kill them. One day a man came to me who told me that his wife also helped the Jews and that now she had been arrested.

'She is in the police station and probably she will be put to death. Now there is a policeman who is willing to let her escape if we pay him 600 guilders, but I have no money.'

'I can help you,' I said. 'Come back in an hour.'

"In the meantime I collected all the money from my friends and all I had myself, and it was exactly 600 guilders. I gave it to him to save the life of his wife.

"But he was a betrayer. His wife had not been arrested. The enemy had told him to find out whether I helped Jewish people.

"So this man thought that at the same time he could make some money out of this situation. He went home with 600 guilders in his pocket. But five minutes later the enemy came, and my whole family was arrested.

"Later, when I heard that this man had betrayed us, hatred came into my heart, just as it happened with you. I had given him the last money I had. But then I read in the Bible that hatred is really murder in God's eyes (see Matt. 5:21-22).

"How glad I was that I knew what I could do against hatred. The Bible says, 'The blood of Jesus Christ [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin. ... If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:7-9).

"I brought my hatred to Jesus. He forgave me and cleansed my heart with His blood.

"After the war this betrayer was sentenced to death. I wrote to him: 'What you have done through your betrayal caused the death of my 84-year-old father, my brother, his son and my sister in prison. I myself have suffered terribly through your fault, but I have forgiven you everything. This is just a very little example of the forgiveness and love of Jesus. He lives in my heart; that is why I can forgive you.'

'Jesus will also come into your heart and will make you a child of God. Confess your sins to Him. On the cross of Calvary He has finished all for your sins and mine.'

"Later he wrote me: 'I have prayed: "Jesus, when You can give such a love for the enemy in the heart of someone who follows You, then there is hope for me." I have indeed confessed my sins to Him. Now I know that I am a child of God, cleansed by the blood of Jesus.'

"So you see that Jesus used me to save the soul of this same man I had hated so much. Do you know that if you do not forgive, you do not receive forgiveness?

"Jesus said: 'For if you forgive other people their failures, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you will not forgive other people, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you your failures' (Matt. 6:14-15, The New Testament in Modern English). You cannot do that, neither can I, but Jesus can!"

That same day the African prisoner sent a message to his wife: "Forgive my murderers. You are not able to do it, I am not able, but Jesus is able. If we are not willing, then we ourselves do not receive forgiveness."

When Jesus comes and we have bitterness, yes, even hatred in our hearts, then we will not be ready to meet Him with a clean heart. "Everyone who has at heart a hope like that keeps himself pure, for he knows how pure Christ is" (1 John 3:3).

In the time of the final battle, many will be filled with hatred. If we are not cleansed from bitterness, then we will not stand on victory ground.

It is one of the laws of the kingdom of God that men receive peace only if they are always ready to forgive unreservedly. We never touch the love of God so much as when we love our enemies.

But we don't have to do it ourselves. The Bible says, "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:5, NKJV). God does the job. Hallelujah!

Read a companion devotional.

Corrie ten Boom (1892-1983) spent 10 months in a concentration camp during World War II for helping to hide Jews. For 40 years after her release, she shared the love of God with millions around the world through speaking and writing.