

# **‘Love Your Enemies’ Is a Command, Not a Suggestion**

Jesus taught it. Paul reaffirmed it. And neither of them said their teaching was optional for Christians. Instead, God Himself commands us, His children, to love our enemies and to bless those who curse us.

No one said it would be easy. No one even said it would be possible, without divine help. But, without any question, the call to love our enemies is a divine command, not a human suggestion.

In the words of Jesus, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor[a] and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, 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, that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore be perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:43-48).

In the words of Paul, “Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse. ... Repay no one evil for evil. Commend what is honest in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘Vengeance is Mine. I will repay,’ says the Lord. Therefore, ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:14, 17-21).

To be sure, this is not talking about how our country's military should respond to a foreign invader. Nor is it telling a husband and father what to do if a serial killer breaks into his home, intent on killing his wife and children.

These teachings refer to our interpersonal relationships. To our attitudes. To our responses.

Will we bless those who curse us, or will we curse them back? Will we love those who hate us, or will we hate them back? Will we overcome evil, or will we be overcome by evil?

There are certainly times for making a spirited defense of one's position, especially for the cause of righteousness. And there are certainly times when evil must be publicly and plainly rebuked.

But you can rebuke someone while having great love for them at the same time.

You can even want justice to be done while having great love for the criminal justly sentenced for his crime.

In short, the command to love our enemies does not call on us to compromise our ethics. It calls on us to take our ethics to a higher level, hating evil to the point that we refuse to be corrupted by it.

At the recent National Prayer Breakfast, "Arthur Brooks, a Harvard professor and president of a conservative think tank, had decried a 'crisis of contempt and polarization' and urged his listeners to 'love your enemies.'"

In response, President Trump remarked, "I don't know if I agree with you," adding, "I don't like people who use their faith as justification for doing what they know is wrong." And, the president continued, "Nor do I like people who say, 'I pray for you' when you know that is not so."

On the one hand, I commend Trump's honesty.

He openly questioned what Prof. Brooks had said rather than putting on a religious show. And he openly admitted his struggles at the end of his talk, saying, "I'm sorry. I apologize. I'm trying to learn. It's not easy. When they impeach you for nothing and then you're supposed to like them, it's not easy folks. I do my best."

But this is where the rubber meets the road. It is not easy to love people who you think have wronged you. To the contrary, it is totally unnatural to love them. "Lord, You're telling me I'm supposed to love them?"

Jesus would reply with an emphatic Yes. In fact, He would say, "That's exactly what I did. I died for My enemies. I forgave My enemies. I blessed My enemies."

And in doing so, He set an example for each of us. As Peter taught, "For to this you were called, because Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'He committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth.' When He was reviled, He did not revile back; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but He entrusted Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

Yes, Jesus left us an example to follow, showing us the redemptive power of all-consuming love. It turns your enemies into your most loyal friends!

This has nothing to do with liking those who hurt you or attack you. Liking has to do with personal preferences. Loving has to do with truly desiring what is best for others. And true love will make personal sacrifices for the well-being of others, even of one's enemies.

As noted by H. S. Vigeveno in his book *Jesus the Revolutionary*:

*Our world has witnessed many a revolution, but none as effective as the one that divided history into B.C. and A.D.*

*Every revolution involves the shedding of blood. So did this one. Not as much blood, perhaps, but the quality of the One far outweighs the quantity of others. Revolutionary, indeed, this mission, to begin with a cross and sway the whole world through suffering love. Revolutionary to build a Church on the sacrifice that offers man forgiveness and atonement with God.*

How remarkable. That is the power of the cross.

Not surprisingly, shortly after the Prayer Breakfast, President Trump was on the warpath, lashing out at those who sought to remove him from office. And I can understand his attitudes and his actions.

After all, from his perspective, he has been the victim of unjust attacks for more than three straight years. This includes the constant vilification of the leftwing media. The unrelenting, often vicious mockery of Hollywood celebrities. The wiretapping of his campaign. The unjust attempts to remove him from office with the Mueller investigation and the impeachment trial. And more.

Yes, from a human perspective it is totally understandable that he not only took a victory lap—who can blame him for that?—but that he went on the attack as well, pulling no punches.

But just think of how transformative it would have been had he said, “I hate the fact that the country is so divided, and I understand I have been a big part of that division. But today, I choose not to retaliate. It’s true that I have been acquitted, and I believe that justice has been done. But I choose to forgive those who sought to remove me from office. And I call on my political enemies and my enemies in the media to work together for the good of our country. I will lead the way.”

If others want to stew in their hatred, let them. We will step higher.

My Stream colleague Al Perrotta put it so well just a few days back, making this brilliant appeal to the president:

“The builder in you knows how this works. Like you did with the Old Post Office Building across from the White House, you’ve done the demo, now comes the beautiful remodel.

“You’ve got the economic heart of America pounding hard. Now turn to nurturing America’s soul.

“You’ve shown us the bloody, unbowed street fighter. Show us the ‘better angels of our nature.’

“Today, in this hour of political victory, show us the greatest victory is to love one another.

“May the grace and wisdom of God guide you.

“Yours truly,

“Someone Deplorable.”

Unfortunately, President Trump missed the first opportunity to do this in the aftermath of his acquittal. And many of us who voted for him have missed our opportunity as well, feeling nothing but loathing for the Democrats and their ilk. (I should also mention the Christians who show no love for the president and his allies. They, too, have chosen hatred over love.)

The good news is that today is a new day.

All of us can step higher. All of us can seek to heal rather than destroy. And all of us, without compromising our convictions or violating our ethics one iota, can choose to love our enemies, with the help of the Lord.

Will we?