

Why Christians Should Never Be Motivated by Revenge or Personal Justice

“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” (Matt. 5:44).

Loving your enemies was and still is scandalous in many ways. Why? Because our sense of justice tells us that loving an enemy is unsafe, unjust and unhelpful. It makes no sense. Love, at least in the way we usually think of it, requires a kind of mutuality between two people. How do we love someone who wants to hurt us?

The command to love your enemies comes within Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, beginning in Matthew 5. In the sections before, Jesus has repeatedly said, “You have heard that it was said _____, but I say to you _____.” In verse 43, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy;’” then he goes on in verse 44 to say, “But I say to you, love your enemies ... and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”

It seems here that Jesus was quoting a common statement in that day about the rightness of having “hate” toward your enemies. Perhaps it was a popular colloquialism in that day, not unlike a well-known bumper sticker or marketing slogan in our day.

The “love your neighbor” idea comes from Leviticus 19:18, which says, “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” Nothing about hating there. Plus, if Jesus thought this verse implied hatred of

enemies, he probably wouldn't have quoted it later in Matthew 22:39 as one of the greatest commandments.

Where then did the idea come from? We definitely see the idea in the Old Testament that God is a God of justice who is capable of justly judging those who reject him. We also see this in the New Testament with, for example, what happens to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts when they lie to the Holy Spirit as God takes their lives (Acts 5:1-11).

But these are always God's doings. Though people and institutions may be used by God to carry out his justice, they are never allowed to take it into their own hands, and they are never commanded to "hate" anyone. This is vengeance, which is reserved for God alone. Only God can perfectly deal with everyone and everything.

Still, it would be easy for some to make a kind of inference that God wants us to hate our enemies, especially with our natural human tendency toward anger and hatred. Probably what happened, then, is that there was unauthorized add-on to the command to love one's neighbor in Jesus' day. There is evidence that some Jewish groups read the text this way, and it is not hard to imagine the human heart saying, "If I am supposed to love my neighbor, I should hate my enemy." This is typical human thinking.

But Jesus is not interested in fallen human thinking. He is interested in calling us to living as children of His kingdom, or, as He says in the next verse, "sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:45a).

Has your view of conflict in relationships been primarily based upon the hate model of culture or love model of the kingdom? {eoa}

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