

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In our service today, in all three readings, we're exploring a common theme. It's on your bulletin cover, we've already heard the theme several times: Love your enemies. Like so many of the laws of God, I fear we are too quick to dismiss them as if they either don't apply to us or as if we've always kept them. We hear the 5th Commandment, "Do not murder," and we quickly dismiss it and move on because we're not murderers. But wait! Jesus said, that if you've ever gotten angry with someone, or called them a name, you're a murderer in God's eyes. Your heart had hatred in it, this contradicts God's law / God's will. God IS speaking to us in the 5th Commandment, because we've committed murder in our heart and in our attitude toward others.

So also today, our Lord Jesus says, "Love your enemies!" Be honest. Was your first reaction: "well, that doesn't really strike a cord with me. That doesn't really talk to me where I'm at because I don't really have enemies."

So before we get too far, let's establish the fact that when Jesus says "Love your enemies" this command really does have something to do with you. In fact, it speaks to your every day life. Do you have enemies? Depends on the definition, doesn't it? Most of you probably do have an enemy in the sense that someone hates you so much they have a contract out on your life. David, who we heard about in our Old Testament lesson, *did* have such an enemy. We'll talk more about his example later. But we don't have such enemies, so let's talk about some Scripture that applies to our every day lives, right? Hold on.

Let's expand our definition a bit. **An enemy is really anyone who fails to show you love.** [Repeat.] Or... one dictionary had this definition: **A person hostile or opposed to another person, especially one who actively tries to do damage; Synonym: opponent.** So let's do this: I'm going to make a list of things someone could do that are unloving... things that damage you... thing that an opponent might do to you. While I read off my list, I want you to think if any of these things have happened to you in the last week. In the last week has anyone:

- Undermined you or your authority. (That's unloving and damaging, isn't it?)
- Spoken bad about you.
- Spoken harshly to you.
- Discourage you.
- Acted thoughtlessly toward you.
- Taken advantage of you, or used you for their own advancement?
- Not spent time with you when they really could have and should have?
- Been impatient with you?
- Been unkind to you?
- Held a grudge against you?
- Been jealous of you?
- Hurt you?
- Owed you obedience but refused to give it?
- Did not respect you?

That's my short list. It could be much longer. If any of those things happened to you in the last week, someone did you damage. They were hostile toward you. They opposed you. By definition, they were your enemy!

Have you changed your mind? Do you have enemies? Do you ever! Maybe not the life-long, seeking revenge, trying to kill you kind of enemies, but still enemies. These enemies are in your own home. Your family members have sometimes been your enemy. They have hurt you, haven't they? Your co-workers have sometimes been your enemy. Your best friend has sometimes been your enemy. Your spouse has sometimes been your enemy.

Now, what does the world say to do when someone hurts you? When they're opposed to you? When they damage you? It says: Fight back! We see bumper stickers and T-shirts that say, "I don't get mad, I get even." And we celebrate that attitude. How many movies can you think of where the main character is horribly wronged in the beginning of the movie and then spends the rest of the movie seeking sweet revenge. Didn't you cheer as his enemies were brought down and revenge was taken? Retaliation against our enemies is natural, it's common and it's celebrated.

So what Jesus says to us today is downright weird. Jesus says, "Love your enemy." Love the person who has opposed you. Who has damaged you. Who has failed to show you love. This is crazy talk, isn't it? Well, maybe we'll understand better if we could have Jesus clarify what he means by "love" and give us a few examples. Well, he does just that:

Matthew 5:38-48 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Some take Jesus' words here and mistakenly think that he is advocating total passivity. Never do anything when you are wronged. That's not what he's saying. In context, he's talking about seeking vengeance. The common belief in Jesus' day was that if someone wronged you, you could seek vengeance as long as your vengeance did not exceed the harm they did to you. A response of hatred and lovelessness was permitted and advocated, as long as it was measured and not excessive.

God's Old Testament law does not say that, and Jesus also disallows it. Instead of responding with hatred and lovelessness and seeking vengeance when someone strikes your right cheek, turn to him the other as well. Love the one who hurt you. Seek NO vengeance.

The second lesson today sheds light on this as well: **"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,'" says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink."**

Jesus continues: **"And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well."** Instead of resentfully and hatefully responding to a lawsuit, respond in love. That love should fill our hearts and reveal itself in our actions.

And Jesus says, **"If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."** Romans were authorized to compel someone to service. If mail needed to be delivered to a neighboring town, the Roman postman could force you to help him, even making use of your donkey. Don't have a spirit of bitterness and annoyance, but of love and helpfulness.

Jesus says, **"Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."** What is a frequent response when someone asks us for help. Shields up. Assume the worst. Respond with annoyance and a lack of love. Jesus forbids that.

He goes on: **"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."** Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.

So with all of these examples, Jesus is teaching that our response to those who seek to do us harm, or who inflict damage on us, or who are opposed to us... our response is to be one of love and an kindness.

The Bible is full of examples of this kind of love.

- Abraham rushes to rescue his nephew Lot when he and his family were captured by an invading army. This even though Lot is shown to be a less than blameless man.
- Joseph showed generous forgiveness toward his brothers who had sold him into slavery and lied to their father. Revenge would have been easy.
- David twice spared the life of Saul who was trying to kill him. We learned about one of those two episodes in our Old Testament reading today.
- Stephen prayed for those who stoning him to death.
- And of course, we have Jesus himself praying for those crucifying him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

In every case, a resentful, vengeful response would have been easily justifiable. But these men of faith responded by loving their enemies. This is what our God calls us to do.

Now, key question: Why does God call us to love our enemies? Is it because we will personally gain when we love our enemies? Honestly, no... not always. Sometimes we suffer more because we loved our enemies and did not seek vengeance. And sometimes the world might view us as "soft" or as cowards for not getting even with those who harmed us.

So what could possibly move then to always respond to evil with good? What could move us to love our enemies?

There's only one thing: The love of Jesus for us. And if we're going to appreciate his love for us, we have to understand how totally undeserving we are of it. We have acted as enemies of God. Does that sound like an exaggeration? When were you ever an enemy of God? But listen. At the beginning of the sermon, I listed some things people may have done to you in the past week that were hurtful or damaging, proving that people have indeed acted as your enemy. Now I'm going to read back some of the very same things, and tell me if you've ever done these against God... thus showing that you, by your actions, are an enemy of God. How many times in the last week or month:

- Undermined God or his authority.
- Spoken bad about God... or not at all.
- Discouraged God by your words or actions?
- Acted thoughtlessly toward God.
- Taken advantage of God, or used him for your own advancement?
- Not spent time with God when you really should have and could have?
- Been impatient with God?
- Been unkind toward God?
- Held a grudge against God or something he allowed in your life?
- Owed God obedience but refused to give it?
- Did not respect God?

These things I listed are actions and words of enemies of God. Does God hate us? Did he send his Son to exact vengeance on us? No, Romans 5 says, **"When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous**

man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Christ lived for you, his enemy, a holy life. Christ died for you, his enemy. Christ took your guilt... your lack of love for both friend and enemy... your lack of love for him... Jesus took that guilt, and he faced the Father's wrath in your place... on your behalf, so you wouldn't have to ever face the wrath of God. For Jesus sake, God has fully and freely forgiven you, his enemy.

Why should you now forgive your enemies... that is, anyone who does anything against you ever, anyone who hurts you in any way? Because your heavenly Father found it in his heart to forgive you, and you've done far more against him, than anyone has done against you. The power to love your enemies is not within you. It's in the heart of Christ. So where is the power to love your enemies? By faith, Christ is in you, and that power is in him. Trust in Jesus, and you will be able to love your enemies.

This week, I want you to try something. Deal with conflict in a different way. Don't get angry. Don't get defensive. Don't seek to get even. Instead, with the love of Christ that is in you, forgive. Let go. And love. If someone speaks bad about you, respond with the love of Christ. If someone is discouraging, respond with the love of Christ. If someone takes advantage of you, respond with the love of Christ. If someone is impatient, unkind, holds a grudge, contradicts, fails to respect you... respond with the love of Christ. Love your enemies? Impossible? Keep the cross of Christ before your eyes and constantly remember how he loved you and forgave you. That's where you'll find the power to change and to truly love your enemies.

Loving your enemies is weird. It's unnatural. It's counter cultural. And it's Christian. We love... even our enemies, because Christ first loved... even us. Amen.