

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Friends in Christ,

What would Jesus preach? The previous four weeks, something has become increasingly clear. Jesus would preach something shocking. Jesus would preach something counterculture, something counterintuitive. Jesus would preach something that is a challenge to our reason, and a challenge to common sense, and a challenge to the way we've always thought and the way everyone thinks. When you hear Jesus preach, you often just want to say, "Huh?! Really?" He makes you stop and think, and reevaluate.

So far we've heard Jesus say crazy things like this: (1) Those who are persecuted and insulted? They are the happy ones. Happy also are the meek and those who mourn. Shocking, right? (2) We've heard Jesus preach that you are people who are in this world to preserve it from rotting... you are the preservers of righteousness in this world. You are the ones who give God's light in this world of darkness. You, in spite of your position of relatively little influence are the salt of the earth. The light of the world. Not what you would have guessed, but Jesus preaches it. (3) We heard Jesus preach that not only is murder worth of God's judgment, but so is anger and calling someone insulting words. And not only is cheating on your spouse offensive to God, but so is lust—looking at someone with sexual desires that is not your spouse. These are just some of the crazy things Jesus has preached.

We're seeing a pattern, right? He often says the unexpected. He often teaches us that **the way things really are contradicts the way we've always thought**. "Well I just thought..." Jesus says you were wrong in your thinking. "But everyone thinks like that / does that / says that." Jesus says: Not God. And not you. Reality is different than what you've always thought.

So today maybe you won't be shocked to discover Jesus again says something shocking. He preaches something that is different than what we've always thought. What Jesus says to us today is "Love your enemies." Okay, got it. No problem. I'll write that down and remember that the rest of the day. Easy. But not so fast. Before we're done with this concept, once again, Jesus is going to make us very uneasy, and squirming in our seats.

We don't like to feel that way, so right from the start, when we hear "Love our enemies" we start coming forward with objections like lawyers. we immediately start to find loop holes and ways to dismiss this as applying to us or our particular situation.

Objections:

- For example, you might start to think of enemies in just a very general sense. So you're saying not to hate communists like in China or North Korea. Or don't hate terrorists. As long as we can keep the category very general and not attach "enemy" to any specific person in our life, we might be able to accept this teaching of Jesus.
- And if we try to take it down to the personal, you might rationalize: "Well, I don't have any enemies." No one who totally hates me or wants to kill me.

But the truth is that everyone has enemies. Google tells me that an enemy is simply, "Anyone who actively opposes you or is hostile to you." There is no one in your life that actively opposes you? Sure there is. No one is ever hostile toward you? Sure they are. Your enemy is anyone who has hurt or harmed you in any way. Maybe they're not constantly your enemy. But when you are actively opposed or treated in a hostile way,

you have an enemy. An enemy that Jesus commands you to love!

EXAMPLES: Maybe it's a *bully at school*. Or a *teacher* that doesn't like you and so doesn't treat you fairly. Maybe it's a *rival at work* fighting for the same promotion you want. Maybe you've got a *neighbor* you've got ongoing conflict with. And couldn't we say that sometimes even within our *own family* there is someone who actively opposes us, or treats us with hostility? In fact, often times the greatest hurt comes from those closest to us. I pray they are not a continuous enemy and that those incidents are few and far between. But does someone with in your family sometimes act as an enemy? Yes.

So this is personal. This applies to you. You do have enemies. And Jesus preaches today: "Love your enemies."

- Another way we try to deflect this teaching is to carry it to the extreme so we can dismiss it. "So what if the Taliban break into my house with machine guns and hold my family at gunpoint? I'm supposed to love them? What, are we supposed to hug it out?" Let's keep this real. And, yes, Jesus still calls us to love our enemy. But we'll see what that means in a little bit.
- Others will push back and try to dismiss this command of Jesus by saying, "They don't deserve my love. Besides, if I love them, they will hurt me more or use me more." "Love your enemies." We'll see how that applies in that situation too.

So let's see what Jesus really taught. What does Jesus really mean? Here's the bottom line question that Jesus really wants us to wrestle with today: **"What is your heart's response to those who have hurt you in some way?"** [Repeat]

Here's what Jesus says:

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [Note: The love your neighbor part is everywhere in the Bible. We can point to multiple places where God commands us to love everyon. However, the "hate your enemy" is NOWHERE in the Bible. Yet that's what people were saying. People used reason to exclude certain people. They qualified God's command by saying, "Your neighbor is everyone *who isn't your enemy*."

It's easy to divide people into categories to make the command to "love" easier There are those who are your neighbor, and those who are enemies. I classify people as one or the other. The first group I owe love, the second group I am free to hate. I choose the categories and God will get on board with my decision. There. I've kept God's command!

But Jesus stops this type of thinking cold. Love your neighbor and hate your enemy?...

44 But I tell you, love your enemies

[So how man categories are there? Just one! All people are together in the single category of people whom you are to love. Love everyone... including people you would put into the category of "enemy."

A man once asked Jesus how he could inherit eternal life. Jesus told him "Love God above all things. Love your neighbor as yourself." The man asked, "Well, who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus told the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. Most think the point of that parable was to teach us to be kind to others. But that wasn't the main point. The main point is to answer the question, "Who is my neighbor? Who is it exactly that I must love as myself?" Jesus told of a Jewish man who was mugged on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Fellow Jewish people who were also leaders in the church passed by the injured man and didn't help him. But then a Samaritan came along. Jews and Samaritans never got along. A Samaritan would never help a Jew. A Samaritan would never be *expected* to help a Jew. Except that he did. He

treated the man's wounds. Put him on his donkey to take him somewhere to recover. And he paid for his lodging until he was well enough to travel again. Jesus point was clear. Who is your neighbor? EVERYONE. Or, to put it another way: Is there anyone in your life that you have God's permission not to love? The answer is "no."

So every attempt to disqualify some from the command to love has failed. So our minds try a new angle. *But what it does it mean to love our enemies?* Maybe it means to just ignore them. Or as long as I don't actively oppose them or be hostile toward them. Or maybe if I just avoid them, or put them out of mind. Is that what it means to love them? This is where I'd like to jump back and look at what Jesus said a few verses earlier.

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' [The world's way of thinking: Don't get mad, get even. If someone hurts you, it is within your right to exact a similar, measured response to get back at them. That's fair, right? You might think so, but... **39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.**

In other words, in all of this, Jesus is teaching us to love our enemies with our actions... not by avoiding them. We kind of have a running joke in my house. If my wife asks me for money (maybe she forgot her wallet, or is running short since she does most of the shopping), I almost always give her twice as much as she asks for. Her request always seems to small to me. I'm going for bread, could I have \$2.50? Here, take \$5.00. Maybe there's something else she'll need. I'm going to Waco for Nathan's basketball game, do you have \$20 for admission and concessions? Here, take \$40. You don't want to be short. She recognizes my love in that I give her more than she asks for. Aren't I a great, loving husband?

But here's what Jesus says: Do the very same thing for your enemies. And this I have not done. In fact, I don't even do it for people I don't know. They're not my enemy, but I don't know them. We have people who come to our church requesting help. I rarely have given more than they asked for. "Can I have a bag of food from your pantry? A bag is what they get. Can I have \$3 to take the bus. I have never given \$6 after such a request. One guy asked for a tank of gas. I went over to HyVee and filled the tank on his big pickup truck. When it was full he said, "This truck has a double tank. Can you fill the second one?" I said no. And these people aren't my enemies! How much more have we not done acts of kindness and generosity for those who have actively opposed us or been hostile toward us?

44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [not "prey on" those who persecute you. Pray for them.] **45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.** [In other words, do this because it's what your heavenly Father does. God does not discriminate in pouring out his blessings on all people. When the sun rises in the morning and brings warmth on the land and causes things to grow, is that only for believers? Do you bask in the sun while the atheist next to you has a dark shadow over him? No. The sun shines on both of you. When rain falls, does it only fall on the Christian's field or garden? And the unbeliever next door experiences a draught? No. The rain falls on both alike. God's loving kindness I poured out upon all the same.

46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Be PERFECT. What does that mean? To what degree? As your heavenly Father is perfect. Well, with that, Jesus has just squeezed us to the point where we just can't wiggle any more.

Are you ready to confess? "Father, I have not loved my neighbor as you command. Father, I have not loved my enemies. Father. I am guilty. I have sinned. I am not perfect. I deserve no reward from you. I deserve only punishment.

To the one who confesses this, the Father responds with the good news. "You have acted as my enemy. You have actively opposed me in that you have not loved your enemies. You have been hostile toward me. But... I have chosen to love you. In Romans 5:10 it says, "When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son." And a few verses earlier: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

God's love for his enemies is crystal clear. He pours out his kindness through his Son. You know John 3:16. "God so loved [believers] that he sent his one and only Son? God so loved church people / good people / hard-working people? No... "God so loved *the WORLD* that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Jesus was perfect. The Father said so on two occasions. The Gospels record his perfect life. Jesus' enemies were silent when asked to prove him guilty. He was perfect. Yet he allowed himself to be falsely accused, abused, condemned, and nailed to a cross. For us sinners, for God's enemies, he hung on Calvary's cross, offering his very life as the perfect sacrifice for your lack of love, and for mine. On that cross he paid the enormous debt that we owed. And Jesus declared, "It is finished!" The debt paid. You are forgiven. On the third day he rose. The proof. The guarantee of God's love for you.

Toward the beginning, I asked you to consider this: "**What is your heart's response to those who have hurt you in some way?**" Now that you know the heart of God for you... his love for you while you were still enemy, still sinner. Now that you have remembered Christ's sacrifice for you. Will your heart's response be to love those who are your enemies? Will you pour out Christ's love to all people? With the new heart created in you by Christ Jesus himself, from this day forward and in joyful, peaceful thankfulness, will you *love your enemies*. May God fill us with his power and love so we can do exactly that for the honor and glory of his great name. Amen.