

Love Your Enemies
Matthew 5:43-48

Pastor Tom
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Izzeldin Abuelaish was born and raised in the Jabalia refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. He received his elementary, preparatory and secondary education in the refugee camp schools. He then received a scholarship to study medicine in Cairo which led to many other educational opportunities. He was the first Palestinian doctor to receive a staff position at an Israeli hospital where he treated both Israeli and Palestinian patients. He and his wife had 8 children.

But tragically his wife died from acute leukemia in November 2008. That December he was able to take a day off work and travel to the beach with his 8 children. It was the first time they had some relief since the death of their mother. He wondered about the children's future in that narrow strip of land called the Gaza Strip on the Mediterranean Sea between Israel and Egypt governed by the Hamas radicals. He took many pictures that day but this one of 3 of his daughters became especially memorable.

On the left sits Mayar who was 15. Mayar was a smart and bright girl. she was number one in math in the Gaza Strip. She was open-minded. She was the chairman of the students' parliament. In the middle is Aya who was 13 and planned to be a journalist. She wanted to be the voice of the voiceless, to defend others, and to work for them. On the right is Bessam. She was 21 and had taken over the role of mother since her own mother's passing. She was supposed to get her BA a few months later. Abuelaish said, "She was the mother, the sister, the friend, the good person to everyone after I lost my wife".

A couple of weeks after the top picture was taken, there was a major flare up between Hamas and Israel. Rockets flew back and forth. Then the Israeli army entered into the Gaza Strip in an attempt to root out Hamas militants.

The civilian population was caught in the middle of an all-out war. For over 2 weeks they hunkered down in their homes, apartments and tents trying to survive. Dr. Abuelaish had no connections with Hamas. He was an advocate for peace and had many Israeli friends. But on January 16, 2009 an Israeli tank positioned itself outside his family's building. For reasons still unknown it fired a rocket that hit his daughter's bedroom. Mayar and Aya were instantly killed, along with their 17 year old cousin Noor. Another daughter was gravely wounded. The

doctor helped his wounded surviving daughter out of the bedroom in an attempt to save her life. He asked Bessam to see if she could help the others. Just then a second shell hit the room. It killed Bessam and sent the rest of the family sprawling on the floor.

The doctor called an Israeli friend in the Israeli media. This friend was just about to go on the air at the time of the call. He took the call and sat at his news desk with the cellphone on speaker. He played it live for the Israeli public. He would not hang up on the doctor. The Israeli newscaster appealed to the Israeli army to withdraw from the area. Israelis all across the region responded and started calling their friends in the army. The shelling stopped. Then an ambulance arrived to take him and his wounded children to hospital in Israel where the staff at the hospital saved her life. The doctor was unable to get back into the Gaza Strip for the funeral of his daughters because the border was closed. Now the doctor was left to deal with his grief and tend to his 5 surviving children. How would he respond?

Many of his own people encouraged him to hate those who killed his daughters. But the doctors startling response reverberated throughout Israel, the Gaza Strip and around the world. Instead of hating, he chose the opposite. He chronicled his story in a book entitled "I shall not hate." He declares on the book's cover, "if the death of my three daughters is the last sacrifice on the road to peace between Palestinians and Israelis, then I will accept that sacrifice." Instead of seeking revenge or sinking into despair and hatred, Dr. Abuelaish has called for the people of the Middle East to stop the bloodshed and start talking to each other. Sadly, as many of you know the conflict continues. There was another Hamas/Israel war last summer.

But Dr. Abuelaish has not let this stop his efforts to bring hope. He started a foundation called "Daughters for Life." It provides scholarship awards to encourage young women from impoverished families to pursue their studies in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Syria. Today, he and his 5 surviving children live in Toronto where he is currently Associate Professor of Global Health at the University of Toronto.

(<http://daughtersforlife.com/devdfl2013/biography/>)

This man had a choice to make on how he would respond to a nameless and faceless enemy. Now if something like this happened to you, how do you think you might respond? Most of us may not have to face an

event of this magnitude. But how do we respond to enemies in our lives? Some of us might immediately object to the claim that we even have enemies. But before we declare ourselves enemy free, maybe we need to think about this a little. Is there someone you dislike or conflict with often? Is there someone whose personality seems to clash with yours? How do you feel about people who have different political leanings or music preferences or worship preferences? How do you respond to players on the other team people from a different school or a different social group or salary scale or company? Some of us may not have personal enemies. But we consider a particular group or institution our enemy – the government; a political party; a corporation, Canada Revenue Agency, a church. And if we meet someday from that institution we immediately feel that hostility or dislike for them. How do you respond to your enemies? What does God expect of His people when it comes to relating to our enemies?

In the last section of Jesus' discussion about the law, he brings up the topic of enemies. We will see him declare one of his most radical commands throughout His entire teaching. Today we are going to look for answers to 4 questions. What was the common practice towards enemies? What does Jesus command? What reasons does He give for this command? How do we go about obeying it? We will also address a controversial statement by Jesus that seems to advocate perfectionism. It's all found in Matthew 5:43-48

Matthew 5:43-48 English Standard Version (ESV)

Love Your Enemies

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so 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. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, ^[a] what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

What was the common practice? Love your neighbor. Hate your enemies. Many lived out this practice. You would show love to those who are close to you. Hate those opposed to you. But where did they get this from? Love your neighbor is found in the Old Testament. *Leviticus 19:18 – You shall not take vengeance or bear a*

grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” A neighbor was anyone in need that an Israelite might come across in his daily life. So loving your neighbor and especially the people in the community of God was a clear expectation. The Old Testament never says “hate your enemies.” In fact there are texts that express the expectation of help for enemies. *Exodus 23:4-5 “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of the one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it from him.”* *Proverbs 25:21 – “if your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.”*

But there are texts that talk about God’s hatred of evil. This is a central theme of the Old Testament. Evil people were enemies of God. Sometimes the Psalmists wrote prayers against God’s enemies and evil people in general. Psalm 139:21-22 (ESV) ²¹“Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? ²²I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies. Or one of the more disturbing passages in the Old Testament is found in Psalm 137:7-9. ⁷Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!” ⁸O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! ⁹Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!”

These are prayers against evil people in general. We must remember throughout the Old Testament God constantly balances His love and His justice. Another commentator writes “We are to share God’s own balance of love and justice. God loved Adam, but He cursed him. God loved Cain, but He punished him. The people of God loved Israel, but He allowed her to be conquered and exiled, and He set her aside for a while.

The Old Testament prayers reflect this reality. Yet it is one thing to defend the honor and glory of God by seeking the defeat of His enemies. It is quite another to hate people personally as our own enemies. Nowhere in the Old Testament does God Himself commend or command personal hatred towards some individual. God’s standard was always for His people to show love and mercy in interpersonal relationships. So its possible that worshippers around Jesus time took these prayers from the Psalms and concluded it was ok to personally hate

enemies. And is this human tendency to fill in the blanks with something we're not sure about. So if the Old Testament says love your neighbors it seems only natural that you would hate your enemies.

We have documentary evidence that this belief was pretty common. The ancient community Qumran is near where the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were found. This community contained devout and religious Jews who separated themselves from the general society to more intensely stay true to God. Hundreds of scrolls containing their writings were found in caves near the Dead Sea. One of these scrolls contains this saying "that they may love all the sons of light . . . and hate all the sons of darkness. (1QS 1:3-4, 9-10; 19:21-22). This was their practice. Jesus words may be referring to this popular attitude which they shared with many others. Love your neighbors. Love those who love you. But hate your enemies.

What does Jesus command?

But I say to you, **Love your enemies**. Jesus does not say "tolerate your enemies" or "you shall not hate." He commands kingdom disciples to love their enemies. Jesus goes further than anyone else at that time. One commentator notes "there is a sweeping universality in the love Jesus demands which has no parallel in Jewish literature." Jesus goes beyond the practice of non-retaliation to positive love.

Then Jesus gives a very tangible way we can love our enemies. **Pray for those who persecute you**. When we pray for our enemy's good and blessing, we obey this command. One of the Church Fathers, John Chrysostom, wrote this in the 300's "Prayer is the very highest summit of self-control and that we have brought our lives into conformity to God's standards when we can pray for our persecutors." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor executed by the Nazis wrote in *Cost of Discipleship* "This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God."

You may be aware of Jesus' words from the cross "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." One commentator points out that the way the Gospel presents these words reveals they could have been said repeatedly. So it's possible that it was not just a one-time utterance from Jesus' mouth. Jesus could have been praying for his tormentors while they drove the iron spikes through his hands and feet. This is the amazing love we are called to.

Now our enemies might not threaten our lives like they did Jesus.’ Often they are ordinary people. Maybe they are mean, impatient, spiteful, judgmental or self-righteous or they just happen to disagree with us. Whether a conflict is with our marriage partner, our children or parents, our friends and fellow church members, a devious business opponent love. Maybe they are someone you can’t stand or constantly fight with. Maybe they’re our in-laws or landlords or tenants or roommates. In whatever personal relationships we have, God wants us to love. Whoever they are, Jesus commands us to pray for them. The more we honestly pray for their blessing and well-being, the more God may build in us a genuine love for them.

Yet Jesus knows that these commands are unlike anything His listeners have ever heard. He knows that He must give some very good reasons for such commands. **Why love our enemies? Reason 1 – So that you may be sons or daughters of your Father in heaven.** Now some have interpreted this verse to mean that if you show love to your enemies, you will go to heaven regardless of any heart relationship with Christ. Others have concluded that if you don’t love your enemies, you lose your salvation or you’re not really one of God’s children. But I don’t see either meaning as possible in light of the rest of the New Testament. I think Jesus says anyone who actually loves their enemies and prays for them acts like a son or daughter of their Father. That’s what Jesus did. That’s what God does with all the mercy He shows. We’re called to be like our heavenly Father. When we love our enemies we show we are God’s children.

Reason 2 - It imitates God’s heart. He shows grace and love to everyone. He makes the sun rise on the evil and good. He sends rain on the just and unjust. This grace from God is known as common grace. These are blessings He gives to all people regardless of their stance towards Him. These blessings are intended to lead unbelievers to repentance and reconciliation with God. But even if they refuse Him their entire lives, He still shines the sun on them and gives them rain. We are called to imitate God this way by offering indiscriminate love.

But the next reason is one that must have really stirred things up. **Reason 3 – If we love only those who love us, we are no different than the worst and most despised in our society.** If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? You love others who love you? Well so did Josef Stalin the former dictator of the Soviet Union. He loved his family. He loved his daughter especially. Yet he oversaw the murder of millions. I’m

sure members of ISIS love those who love them. They probably have families and kids they love. So we must not think we're doing something spectacular and unusual when we show love to those who love us.

Jesus mentions tax collectors as at least loving those who love them. The tax collectors were one of the most hated groups in Jewish culture. They collected taxes from the Jews for the Romans. A lot of these tax schemes were corrupt. Overtaxing was encouraged to keep tax collectors motivated in their work. But the worst thing about the tax collectors was that most of them were Jews working for the Romans. So they were seen as traitors. Since they were basically cast out of their own social circles, they hung around with the leftovers – other tax collectors and obvious sinners like prostitutes who were shunned by strict Jews. The Pharisees would certainly have seen themselves as superior to the tax collectors. Yet Jesus says if you only love those who love you, you're not doing much more than common man. One commentator puts it like this - "To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; to return good for evil is divine." Jesus disciples must live and love in a way superior to the patterns around them.

Jesus concludes with a startling and perhaps troubling statement. "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Now is Jesus advocating perfectionism here? For those of us who struggle with perfectionism and maybe have begun to realize its deadly cycle, this verse can send us spinning backwards. But Jesus is not advocating perfectionism which is the attempt to be perfect and make everything perfect in our own strength according to our own understanding. But here Jesus says aim for the perfection of the Father. Grow in Godliness. Reflect the image of our Heavenly Father. So this appeal by Jesus reminds us to constantly aim to grow in God like character.

Of course no one can ever measure up perfectly beside God and Jesus. But their character is our end goal. To be like God is the calling of every Christian. To strive towards the things He loves and to imitate His character sets us on the right path. This is the righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees that Jesus talked about at the beginning of this section. It's not enough to refrain from killing someone. You've got to deal with your anger. It's not enough to keep yourself from committing physical adultery. You've got to deal with lustful thoughts. It's not enough to follow the letter of the law and divorce for any and every reason. Divorce is a serious

difficult step that should not be entered into except in the situations we talked about two weeks ago. It's not enough to keep some tortuous oath that really gets us out of keeping our word. We must live lives of integrity that help people to never question our word. It's not enough to limit our retaliation to eye for eye or tooth for tooth. Instead we are to leave vengeance to God and instead put up with being treated poorly for the greater good of witnessing Christ to an evil person. It's not enough to love our neighbor and hate our enemies. Those who go the way of God love their enemies.

I don't know about you. But I can't do this on my own. Dr. Abuelaish certainly did great work in deciding not to hate. But Jesus calls us to go further and choose to love our enemies. Therefore, we must pray to the Lord to change our hearts from hate to love towards our enemies. **Jesus' command to love our enemies requires our dependence on the Holy Spirit to change our hearts.**

Jesus commands us to do something that is impossible in our own strength. Yet He equips and empowers to do it through the Holy Spirit. He loved us while we were His enemies. (Romans 5:10) He bore the abuse of enemies so that we might become His friends. He commands us to live the same way. We desperately need God to do His work in us to change us from the inside out. That only starts when we first receive Christ into our lives and put our trust in Him as our Savior and Lord. If you have never received Christ, now is the day of salvation. Now is the time you need to turn to Him and receive Him as Lord over your life. You must stop trusting yourself and turn to Him.

But once we have received Christ, our journey of salvation does not end. We have been saved from the penalty of sin. We need salvation from the power of sin in our lives – anger; lust; divorce; revenge; oaths and hatred of enemies. So we must come to the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to do His work in us of transforming us from the inside out. Will you you're your heart to the Holy Spirit's transforming work today?