

**The Quest for Christian Values:
Loving Our Enemies, Christian or Crazy?**

Matthew 5:43-47

Dr. J. Howard Olds

January 16, 2005

In Bill Adler's popular book of letters from kids, an 8 year old boy from Nashville, Tennessee makes this contribution:

"Dear Pastor, I know God wants us to love everybody, but he surely never met my sister." Sincerely, Arnold.

There is an old jingle I learned as a child that puts it another way:
To live above with those we love, well that will be glory. To live below, with those we know, well, that is a different story.

In our Quest for Christian Values, we concluded last week that it boils down to loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. This is the great commandment, said Jesus. Then eliminating our need to debate the nature of neighborliness Jesus goes one step further in the Sermon on the Mount and says, "*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.*" Unless we wonder who our neighbor might be, Jesus uses the Sermon on the Mount as an opportunity to explore and define the breadth and width of neighborliness. What Jews struggle to understand and Eastern religions long to believe, Jesus commanded. The pinnacle of all Christian values lies here. Was Jesus an impractical idealist or practical realist? Well, you can decide. But never forget that Jesus dared to live his beliefs. If I long in any way to follow this value of Jesus, there are some questions that come to mind about this high and lofty ideal of life. I would like to discuss some of them with you today.

Who Are Our Enemies?

For the first hearers of these words, the enemy was no mere abstraction. They encountered the enemy every day. Some were religious authorities who called followers heretics and heathen and stirred up riots against them. For the early Christians the enemy was Rome who insulted them, injured them, jailed them, and fed them to the lions.

For the twelve, maybe the struggle was more subtle. Sometimes we forget that the disciples had families. They had wives and children. Imagine Philip explaining to his family why he was leaving again. Picture Peter convincing his wife that being faithful meant traveling to Jerusalem with Jesus. Think about Jesus, telling his brothers why he would not come home to Nazareth and tend to business.

Wherever two or more people gather for any period of time, conflict is sure to come. And so it seems extremely practical to me that Jesus would have said, “If you want to follow me all the way, then we must discover how to love those who do not agree with us. We must, indeed, learn to love our enemy. If Jesus had not expected us to have some enemies, why would he have instructed us to love them?”

Stanley Hauerwas, of Duke Divinity School says, “Methodists have one theological conviction. God is nice.” Methodists have one ethical corollary, “We ought to be nice too.” Have we become so bland and uninteresting that we no longer have enemies to love?

Some of us have seen the enemy. **They are the people we have hurt.** The enemy is us. Regrets, I have had a few. How about you? Sometimes I slip and fall, give in to some temptation and people get hurt. For a long time I used bombs to settle conflicts when BB guns would have been sufficient. Ambition can blind me to the needs of others. While I believe in forgiving and being forgiven, I have had to realize that I am not in charge of other people’s forgiveness of me. When I have practiced Matthew 18 to the best of my ability (and I believe the Church ought to be practicing it in its relationship to one another) and no reconciliation is possible, I am then challenged to love my enemies by the grace of God.

Some of us have seen the enemy. **They are the people who have hurt us.** We do not live in an innocent world. All that happens to us is not the will of God or our responsibility. There are people around us, often close to us, who have done us harm. The facts are that some people in this world have treated you wrongly and unfairly.

- There are bullies lurking at every school.
- There are teasers embedded in many families.
- There are parents who abuse their children.
- There are children who make life miserable for their parents.
- There are spouses who break their marriage vows.
- The workplace can be a hostile environment.

Some of us can still hear those jeers and remember our tears. Only by facing the facts, plowing through the pain, and finding the grace of God will we be able to sing a song of love. We have seen the enemy. Sometimes the enemy is those who have hurt us profoundly and deeply in our lives. We have seen the enemy.

The enemy is the evil ones of the world. They don’t know you personally except they are just out to do harm and hurt. They are Osama Ben Laden, Saddam Hussein, the thief, the murderer, the people who would hold a gun to your head and take your life.

Susan Apointe and I lived in the same neighborhood about ten years ago. Susan was getting out of her car at a grocery store when a parolee from the state prison stuck a gun in her face and said, "Get in or I'll blow your head off." Susan got back in the car but immediately said, "In the name of Jesus you are not going to blow my head off. Jesus loves you and I don't hate you." The man wanted money for his sick daughter so Susan wrote a check for \$600 and went by the bank and cashed it. He also complained of unemployment so Susan suggested he apply at Sears where she worked. Downtown by now, Susan told him to take her car, she would catch the bus and with that he leaped from the car and walked away. Susan used the information to help police put him back in prison. But she said, "I pray for him every day. He has already had a brush with the word of God; he was sitting on my Bible the whole time!" Was Susan Apointe extraordinarily Christian or simply crazy? You can decide for yourself.

Why Love Our Enemies?

Hate generates hate. Have you seen the bumper sticker that says "I don't get mad I get even"? No wonder road rage is a national problem.

In Martin Luther King's sermon "Knock at Midnight," Martin says, "My brother A.D. and I were traveling from Atlanta to Chattanooga on a dark and stormy night. For some reason travelers were very discourteous that night. Hardly a single driver dimmed their lights. Finally A.D. who was driving, said, 'I have had enough' as he powered his lights back on bright. I said, 'Don't do that, you are going to cause a wreck and get us killed. Somebody must have sense enough to dim their lights, to break the cycle of hate. If somebody doesn't have sense enough to turn on the dim and beautiful lights of love, we are all going to plunge into the abyss.'"

So a suicide bomber blows up a crowded bus in Israel. Israel responds by destroying an entire Palestinian village. The Palestinians react with more suicide bombers. Who is going to break the cycle of hate?

Hate destroys the hater. A Chinese Proverb puts it succinctly, "Whoever pursues revenge should dig two graves; one for the avenged and one for yourself."

Sadly, over the years I have watched it happen. On every church roll are inactive members who have neither died nor transferred but over time just fade away. Some of them have shifted priorities and are living by different values. Others of them got mad and quit. The vote didn't go their way. The pastor didn't show up on time. A friendship soured and instead of getting over it, they got out; and instead of going on, they let their hurt fester. After all these years they still use it as an excuse for living an unfaithful life. They keep their hurt on the mantel to remind them of the wrong they incurred. In time they are the only ones left to soak in their self-pity. They say, "Let me tell you how I was done wrong," and I listen to those stories and then I say, "That was 30 years ago. The people you are mad at are dead; the pastor you despise has retired. What are you trying to

prove?” The church goes on. People go on. Life goes on. They are stuck in some miserable yesterday. Why forgive your enemies? So you can live, that is why.

God has a better idea. God causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. God says there is a better way to do this. You do not have to live by that old ethic. There is a higher way of life. There is a kinder way of life, a truer way of life, and if God can make the sun shine on all of us, then couldn't we find the grace of God to love those who don't particularly like us? Anybody can love those who love you, what are you doing more than others? Jesus, need you get so explicit?

The love of which God speaks is not sleeping with the enemy as Julia Roberts does in the movie by that title. Love is not the friendship of kindred minds that one might experience in a community of faith. Love is Agape: respect and justice for all. It is a disposition of life by which I choose to relate to all humanity. Loving our enemies is not becoming a doormat to violence and force. In fact it is quite the opposite. It is the most empowering stance a person can experience. Roman law said the military could compel me to carry their pack a mile. It was an oppressive rule and people hated it. That is oppression; that is treating somebody like a slave; that is treating somebody sub-human. But you look him in the eye and say, “Let me take it another mile.” Now who is in charge; now who is empowered; now who is in control of their behavior? This is the principle Jesus is trying to teach.

How Can We Love Our Enemies?

Seek the truth. Some of you were obviously nervous about this sermon. You sent me emails warning me not to go soft on sin, weak on wrong, passive about the problems of our day. I appreciate that, but it also tells me how little we understand the nature of Christian love making; it's something as sentimental as Valentine candy, or the smell of Mother's Day flowers, or apple pie, or the 4th of July.

Jesus resisted evil with all his might and taught his disciples to do likewise. On the day evil nailed Him to a cross, He prayed, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*”

M.L. King, in Loving Your Enemies, said, “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as cooperation with good.”

Pray for power. “*Pray for those who persecute you.*”

It will take supernatural power for us to love our enemies. Bonhoeffer, in Cost of Discipleship, facing death said, “We are approaching an age of widespread

persecution. Our adversaries seek to root out the Christian Church because they cannot live side by side with us. So what shall we do? We will pray. It will be a prayer of earnest love for those who stand around and gaze at us with eyes aflame with hatred, and who have perhaps already raised their hands to kill us.”

Go for perfection. *“Be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* I can think of no word we moderns despise more than the word perfection. We think of perfectionism as a psychological illness, complete with compulsive behavior as its first cousin and nasty niceness as its great aunt. A perfectionist is Bree on Desperate Housewives frantically trying to keep her perfection intact. Perfection here is Teleos: completeness, wholeness, maturity. And our founder, John Wesley, was not shy about asking his followers if they were going on to perfection, as a concrete witness to their discipleship.

Why settle for hate if we are capable of love? Why love some if God can help you love all? Why be less than we are created to be? Is it that we have tried Christian love and found it ridiculous, or is it that lack of faith has kept us from trying it at all? I have a dream today. Love shall overcome someday. Deep in my heart, I do believe, love shall overcome some day.