

## “Love Our Enemies?”

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Matthew 5:38-48 = love for enemies

Did you hear Jesus?



<sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’  
<sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,”

Love enemies? What does Jesus mean by this? Who are our enemies, anyway?

One answer comes from the animated movie *How To Train Your Dragon*. The story is a Viking village oppressed by dragon attacks almost every night. The dragons are so clearly the enemies of the humans that it goes without saying.



That is, until a social outcast could not bring himself to kill an injured dragon. One outsider to another, Hiccup discovers not only that the dragons are trainable, but that they are actually the natural allies of the Vikings against a common enemy, a giant tyrant of a dragon.

His courage to love instead of hate ushers in a new era, a new world where dragon and human live in harmony. This is fantasy of course, but there is nonetheless truth here, some of Jesus’ truth in this tale.

Especially under presumed attack, it is just human nature to see everyone and everything as the enemy, to demonize rather than analyze, to suspect rather than sympathize, to see enemies everywhere rather than allies. Yet a simple act of love can change everything. Never underestimate the power of love over hate.

So who is our enemy? I don't really have any enemies, do you? Who would this be today?

Jesus might be pointing to hated persons here ~ to persons different from ourselves. The Samaritans were hated in Jesus' day, not quite enemies but deeply despised. The animosity between Judeans and Samaritans sets up the ironic twist which makes the parable of the Good Samaritan work. So here Jesus might be saying for us to love the hated and despised.

But then again we generally don't go around hating anyone. Not really. Can you think of anyone you really hate like Samaritans and Judeans?

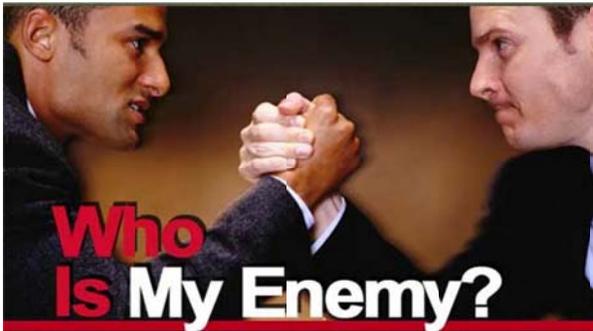
Yet humans being what we are, and even for the best of us, hate is probably lurking just around the corner.

Many years ago I was called up for jury duty. Like everyone I was not exactly welcoming the interruption in my ministerial duties.

When I was called in to the court for jury selection, I was overjoyed that I was number 35 of 36 potential jurors. I figured they would easily fill the 12 slots in the jury long before they got to me. I was way overconfident.

The case was a DUI and the defense would ask each potential juror among other questions if they were a member of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Whether truthfully or not, almost everyone ahead of me answered yes to the question and was dropped from the jury. The defense quickly ran through their limit of names they could strike, so when they got to me, I answered truthfully and ended up on the jury ~ foreman if memory serves.

Both the prosecution and the defense assumed the same thing: that anyone who had lost someone to a drunk driver could not objectively weigh the evidence ~ that loss, grief and pain would inevitably lead to hate, and that would consciously or unconsciously overwhelm reason. That forgiveness of



such a grievous wrong is impossible. The operative assumption was that it is just human nature to want revenge, to make an enemy of anyone accused of a personally experienced wrong.

**Jesus rejects all this.** Jesus in our text today refutes the assumption that our core nature dictates that hate is more powerful than love. Jesus denies that revenge is the only way to overcome wrong. Jesus rejects the idea that only greater evil can triumph.



Certainly Jesus is serious ~ deadly serious: dying on the cross for enemies kind of serious. Jesus is serious not only about loving enemies, but further of being “perfectly” evenhanded in our love and generosity, to friend and foe alike.

**The truth is that all the great world changers** of the last century had extensive enemies’ lists, yet every one of them was inspired by just these verses about “loving enemies,” each found multiple ways to activate second-mile, turn-the-other-cheek, coat-and-cloak kind of treatment of their enemies. Each found multiple ways to overcome hate with love:

- Desmond Tutu
- Dorothy Day
- Mother Teresa
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Clarence Jordan
- Nelson Mandela
- Gandhi



These verses show up in lots of unexpected places. Why even Willie Nelson explored forgiving enemies in his *“Redheaded Stranger”* album.



This is the logic of the kingdom ~ again, quite the opposite of common thinking. Jesus tells us: You cannot use the ways of the world to try and transform the world. You cannot conquer evil with evil. That’s what evil wants, for us to sink to its level. Only returning good for evil is capable of overcoming it.

**W**e started with a fantasy story of enemies, but we know that there are indeed real enemies in the world, especially in war, that most horrendous of human activities. Indeed it was in war Ernest Gordon came to understand Jesus' words about "loving enemies." Gordon grew up a confirmed non-believer. He had no use for the Church, for God, for Jesus.



Gordon rose to the rank of captain in His Majesties Army. Captured in Asia, he was interned three years in Burma, forced to work under the most hellish conditions on the infamous Death Railway across the River Kwai.



A truly reluctant convert, faith came hitting him in the face. Near death from starvation and disease, fellow prisoners lovingly nursed him back to life, communicating the compassion of Jesus and grace of God in terms he could no longer deny.

Given his background, he struggled mightily with the faith. Saying the LORD's Prayer was extremely difficult for him, that part about forgiving our debtors would stick in his throat. Our text today about loving enemies was too much for him. How could he love those who treated him so brutally?

The prisoners were working in a rail yard when love of enemies became real for Gordon. A train with wounded Japanese soldiers came into the yard. They were suffering terribly, groaning, crying out for water. None of the guards paid them any attention.

Gordon suddenly realized that the bushido code of the Japanese army meant they treated their own wounded as cruelly, as harshly as they treated their enemies. Gordon and his companions brought water and ministered to those "enemies" who were now no longer "the enemy."

Gordon went on to become Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University. He was there when I came through. His conversion experience is the basis for the 2001 movie *"To End All Wars."*



Jesus is right and in the crucible of war Earnest Gordon definitely got the message: the only way to end war is not to fight more wars, but rather to change ourselves, to replace hate with compassion. That is the essence of following Jesus.



Frederick Buechner has pointed out that it is fairly easy to love equals, the less fortunate, even superiors:

“[But] then there is the love for the enemy ~ love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world.”<sup>1</sup>



Jesus is serious, deadly serious, die-on-the-cross serious: those who can live out love for enemies, who love the hated, the despised and the different, not only change ourselves. We transform the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*