

Love Your Enemies

Passage: Luke 6:27-36 | From the series: Luke

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Most people probably don't love their enemies. Most people probably don't even try to love their enemies. In fact, many people love to have enemies: They love to have enemies to hate.

Dan Allender, a therapist, explains:

An enemy shared between friends provides the grisly ingredients for a banquet of contempt. We can laugh—humoring ourselves with his foibles and foolishness and lauding ourselves with our courage and wisdom. In the din of the meal, we never need face that our enjoyment of each other is grounded in hatred...

The enemy serves as the platform for doing good—that is, destroying what is dangerous in order for good to grow. The person who pulls weeds in a garden knows he does good through eradicating something evil. For that reason, enemies must be viewed as more than merely enemies; they must be viewed as an enemy of that which is good and right...

The enemy can easily allow me a platform for self-righteous service unto God and humanity. He enables me to join with others in dark fellowship. He provides the war that compels me to put aside doubts, fears, and struggles in order to serve the great good of the righteous.¹

When I was a student journalist, I bonded with others in dark fellowship against a common enemy. Indeed, we were the righteous ones, or should I say the self-righteous ones, and we convinced ourselves that our cause was just. Looking back, I see that season differently.

During the civil war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Miroslav Volf, from Croatia, presented a lecture arguing that “we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ.” When he finished, he was asked, “But can you embrace a Serbian fighter?” Volf had to deal personally with Serbian fighters who raped, pillaged, put in concentration camps, and murdered his fellow Croatians.

It took Volf a while to reply. Can he embrace a Serbian fighter? Eventually, Volf answered, “No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.”

¹ Dan Allender, *Loving Our Enemies*, *Mars Hill Review* (Fall 1995), 12-15.

Because of that question, Miroslav Volf wrote his landmark book, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, which included a deep dive into the darkness of his own heart.²

I can't, but I should. Can you relate? Yes, Jesus, says, "Love your enemies." But that's not all. He also enables us and motivates us to love our enemies.

Do good to enemies

Luke 6:27-28:

"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

Jesus speaks to "you who hear." Because of the radical nature of these words, they can be misheard or misunderstood or screened out altogether. The words require hearing—and hearing again. Thankfully for us, Luke has written them down so that we can hear them repeatedly—that is, if we want to hear them.

Who hears Jesus? Not everyone. How about you?

We must hear not only with our ears but also with our hearts. When you hear these words with your heart and let them sink in, what do they do? What feelings do they arouse? Anger? Helplessness? Frustration? Keep listening.

"Love your enemies." Who would be the enemies of the Jewish disciples he's speaking to? No doubt some of them could identify individual enemies, but most of them save at least Levi, the Jew who collected taxes for the Romans, would likely identify the Romans, who ruled their land with an iron fist and wooden crosses, as their enemies. Jesus is saying, not least, "Love the oppressors. Love *your* oppressors."

Eventually, though, as those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the disciples of Jesus would also make enemies of many of their Jewish countrymen (Luke 6:22). Because of their allegiance to Jesus, they would make more enemies. If you follow Jesus, you risk making enemies simply for following Jesus, more so in other parts of the world than here, but still, following Jesus exposes you.

And, of course, by loving your enemies, you can make more enemies, because some people who are your friends don't want you to love enemies who are also their enemies. If you love your enemies, your former friends might also become your enemies.

² Bernard Bell, "Loving 'Them'" Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino (February 10, 2013).

For some, politics is a blood sport, and civility is a weakness. *New York Times* columnist David French observes, “Civility itself is a questionable value. It’s a version of ‘respectability politics’ when the times call for direct, aggressive action against your evil political opponents.”³

Moreover, the hypercompetitive Valley is a breeding ground for ill will. Your friendly coworker today could be your backstabbing enemy tomorrow.

Who is my enemy? I may as well ask, as a lawyer asks Jesus later in the gospel of Luke, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:28). The question is irrelevant, because if Jesus calls us to love even our enemies, he’s also calling us to love those who aren’t our enemies. For example, love the person you don’t like.

Love your enemies. Yes, but how? Do “good,” a word that includes the concept of beauty. The word translated “good” appears four times in Luke 6:27-36. In fact, Jesus repeats his command almost verbatim later in the passage when he says, “But love your enemies, and do good . . .” (Luke 6:35).

The two other imperatives in the series, calling for us to “bless” and “pray,” are ways of doing good, or beautiful. Also, “those who hate you,” “those who curse you,” and “those who abuse you” would be enemies. Do good—do beautiful—to those who hate you, those who curse you, and those who abuse you.

How do you love your enemies, including those who hate you, those who curse you, and those who abuse you? Think of something beautiful to do for them and do it. How can you bless them? How can you pray for them? Although it is important to work through dark feelings so that we are not consumed by them, it is possible in most cases to be kind toward those toward whom we harbor ill will.

The Napalm Girl

Phan Thi Kim Phuc was nine years old in 1972 when a photographer captured her running along a puddled roadway in Vietnam, arms outstretched, naked, and shrieking in pain from a napalm attack. She is the famous Napalm Girl.

Even now, more than fifty years later, Kim Phuc continues to receive treatment for burns that cover her arms, back, and neck. However, she says the emotional pain was even harder to endure:

And so I continued to bear the crippling weight of anger, bitterness, and resentment toward those who caused my suffering—the searing fire that penetrated my body; the ensuing burn baths; the dry and itchy skin; the inability to sweat, which turned my flesh into an oven in Vietnam’s sweltering heat. I craved relief that never would come. And yet, despite every last external circumstance that threatened to overtake me—mind, body, and soul—the most agonizing pain I

³ David French, “We Have Reached End-Stage Polarization,” *New York Times* (March 26, 2026).

suffered during that season of life dwelled in my heart . . . I had so much hatred in my heart—so much bitterness.⁴

Love your enemies? Really?

Think through how you wish to be treated

Luke 6:29-31:

“To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.”

Does Jesus intend for us to take him literally? I think not.

What if I respond to someone who strikes me on the mouth by clocking him? He says, “I thought you were supposed to turn the other cheek,” and I say, “You didn’t strike me on the cheek.”

Or what if he strikes me on the cheek, I offer him the other also, he strikes me on the other cheek, and then I clock him? He says, “I thought you were supposed to turn the other cheek,” and I say, “Jesus said ‘offer the other also’ but not ‘offer the first one again.’”

If someone takes my cloak and then wants my tunic (my underwear), do I give it to him so that now I’m naked? Is Jesus advocating nudity?

Give to everyone who begs from you? Everyone? To indiscriminately give to everyone who begs is not necessarily helpful to the beggar. For example, if you give to your 6-year-old every time he or she begs, you’re likely to have a spoiled brat for a child. Do you give money to an alcoholic? In most cases, no.

And if no one strikes me on the cheek, takes my cloak, begs from me, or takes my goods, then am I good with God?

Scholar Charles H. Talbert explains:

The specificity is intended to shock the hearers with an extreme command, at striking variance with the way people usually behave in such a situation, to lead the hearer to think beyond the literal meaning of the words to reflect on the whole pattern of behavior that dominates life. The specific command is not a rule of behavior which can be followed mechanically but is intended to stimulate the imagination to draw out the implications for

⁴ Phan Thi Kim Phuc, “The Bombs Led Me to Christ,” *Christianity Today* (May 2018).

life as a whole When the moral imagination is awakened in this way, the words have had their desired effect. Love of the enemy means not returning evil for evil but responding to violence by creative nonviolence.⁵

Indeed, Jesus awakens our moral imagination and challenges us to think differently about people who do such things and about how we can respond to them. The shockingly specific and mostly inapplicable instructions of verses 28-29 awakens us for the general and entirely applicable Golden Rule. Be prepared, however you're treated, to think through how you would like to be treated in order to do good to them.

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch tells his daughter Scout, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

What was Jesus' posture toward Judas, who would betray him? He offered him the bread and wine of the Last Supper, which represented his body and blood (Luke 22:14-23). Jesus offered to meet Judas' deepest—and eternal—need. Then after Judas betrayed him, identifying him not by striking his cheek but by kissing him, apparently on the cheek, Jesus rebuked those of his followers who would strike with the sword (Luke 22:47-53).

What was Jesus' posture toward those who struck him and stripped him and crucified him? Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

What was Jesus' posture toward those who reviled him while he was on the cross? "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23).

In following Jesus' teaching and example, we embody the gospel, which features forgiveness of sins. Our call is not only to know and share the gospel story but also to live it.

Beautifully rendered

In the novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, a bishop takes in Jean Valjean, a former convict, but Valjean steals silver from him. Valjean is apprehended by police, but the bishop tracks him down and tells the officers that the silver was a gift. Then, the bishop gives Valjean even more silver. He goes beyond a literal interpretation regarding what to do about "one who takes away your goods."

The scene is beautifully rendered in the musical based on Hugo's work, in which the bishop sings to Valjean:

⁵ Charles H. Talbert, "Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel" (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1989), 73.

But my friend, you left so early
Surely something slipped your mind
You forgot I gave these also
Would you leave the best behind?

But remember this, my brother
See in this some higher plan
You must use this precious silver
To become an honest man

By the witness of the martyrs
By the passion and the blood
God has raised you out of darkness
I have saved your soul for God

What a beautiful story. What a beautiful song. What about real life?

Go deeper into grace

Luke 6:32-34:

"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.

Jesus presents three scenarios that feature the approach of "sinners," those who care little or nothing for God. In short, such people are kind toward those from whom they have received kindness or those from whom they expect kindness. One doesn't expect such kindness from enemies. Nothing, of course, is wrong with being kind toward kind people. However, Jesus also wants us to transcend conventional kindness.

To do so, we need grace. In fact, the noun that is translated "benefit" in two places and "credit" in one place would be better translated "grace" [charis], as it is in most other places in the New Testament.

No, it's not easy to love your enemies. It's easy to hate them. But love them? Oh, we need the grace of God! We need to confess our unlove, we need to meet with God, and we need to ask for his help.

Then again, if we know Jesus, we are already familiar with grace: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Whatever our enemies have done to us, we deserve

worse. We deserve hell. God has reconciled us to himself even though we were his enemies (Romans 5:10).

This is amazing grace
This is unfailing love
That you would take my place
That you would bear my cross
You laid down your life
That I would be set free
Oh, Jesus, I sing for
All that you've done for me⁶

Because God has been gracious to us, we can be gracious to our enemies. An enemy can therefore send us deeper into the grace of God, who sent his Son to die for our sins against him. Because of our enemies, we not only need to meet with God, we also get to meet with God.

Our enemies, then, are unwitting advocates for our relationship with God. Allender again: "The enemy shatters the presumption of my self-righteousness by showing me how little heart I have for God."⁷ Enemies are windows into our hearts. Perhaps, then, we can even learn to give thanks for them.

Allender writes of his response to an enemy who sent him a letter condemning his recently published book:

I condemned him and refused to consider his concerns. I may be correct in my mental assessment, but I was dead wrong in my heart. Irrespective of his intention, I knew my heart was hard, cold, and mean. I went to my office burdened with another unwanted fight, but in short order I heard the sorrow of God grieving for my heart. I needed grace at that moment as much if not more than when I first became a Christian.⁸

To love our enemies by doing good to them, we need what Allender needed: we need grace. Go deeper into grace. Doing so may take more than one trip to the office, so to speak. The grace of God enables us to love our enemies and do good to them.

With his grace, Jesus enables us to love our enemies. He also motivates us to love our enemies.

Reward for loving your enemies

Luke 6:35-36:

⁶ Phil Wickham / Lecrae Moore / Jeremy Riddle / Joshua Neil Farro, "This Is Amazing Grace" (Fbr Music, Bethel Music Publishing).

⁷ Allender, 17.

⁸ Allender, 17.

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

The admonition to love your enemies and do good to them comes back again, so it must be important.

Literally, Jesus says “lend nothing while hoping”—that is, don’t lend while hoping that the person you lend to will also lend to you. You don’t need to lend, but if you do, do so in the spirit that Jesus commands.

Jesus isn’t simply commanding; he’s also motivating. He says there’s a “reward” for loving your enemies and doing good to them.

What’s the reward? You will be “sons of the Most High,” an exalted title for God.

But if you believe in Jesus, aren’t you already a son or daughter of the Most High? Yes, Jesus says as much in verse 36, where he calls God “your Father.” Jesus must then mean that when we love our enemies, we enter more fully into the privilege of being the daughter or son of our heavenly Father, the Most High. We realize who we are; we live out who we are. The adage holds true: “Like father, like son.”

We’re kind, especially to our enemies, for the Most High is kind to the ungrateful and even to the evil. We’re merciful, especially toward our enemies, for our heavenly Father is merciful.

Our course, the Most High has been kind to us: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:22).

Of course, our heavenly Father is merciful toward us: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ . . .” (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Literally, Jesus says “Be becoming merciful . . .” Jesus does not expect us to be instantaneously kind and merciful to our enemies. As we go deeper into grace, however, we become more like the Most High, our Father. Be becoming sons and daughters of God.

What a reward! When we love our enemies, we’re sons and daughters of the Most High, our heavenly Father. The reward for loving your enemies is loving your enemies—and freedom from the bondage of hatred, bitterness, and victimhood. For when you love your enemies, you are like the Most High, you are like God, you are like your heavenly Father—free from hatred, bitterness, and victimhood.

Bernard Bell explains:

To the world this looks like powerless weakness, but it confers great strength and power. To respond to evil with good robs the evildoer of the initiative. The one who responds with good is acting on his own initiative. No longer is he a victim. No longer is the evildoer pulling his strings. By refusing to respond in kind he elevates himself above victimhood. He is free! Free to love, free to give, free not to hate. Such kindness may defuse the violent hostility, but even if it does not the one who responds with good is free.⁹

As our enemies unwittingly send us deeper into the grace of God, we take away their power and turn their curses into blessings.

Sometimes, loving your enemies unnerves them, unmasking their desire for power and supremacy. It may even lead them to repentance as we embody the kindness of God, which leads to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Remember what the apostle Paul said: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). Indeed, love for your enemies is God’s love, and it conquers the world.

Daughter of the Most High

One day in 1982, crouched inside Saigon’s central library, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the Napalm Girl, pulled Vietnamese books on religion off the shelves, one by one. “The stack in front of me included books on Bahá’í, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Cao Dai,” she writes. “It also contained a copy of the New Testament.”

Later that year, Kim Phuc wandered into a Christmas Eve worship service in a small church in Saigon. “How desperately I needed peace,” she writes. “How ready I was for love and joy . . . I wanted to let go of all my pain . . . I wanted this Jesus.”

That night, on Christmas Eve in 1982, Phan Thi Kim Phuc gave her life to Christ. She reflects on her experience as a girl and about her life since:

I will never forget the horrors of that day—the bombs, the fire, the shrieks, the fear. Nor will I forget the years of trial and torment that followed. But when I think about how far I have come—the freedom and peace that comes from faith in Jesus—I realize there is nothing greater or more powerful than the love of our blessed Savior.

⁹ Bell.

My faith in Jesus has enabled me to forgive those who have hurt and scarred me. It has enabled me to pray for my enemies rather than curse them. And it has enabled me not just to tolerate them but truly to love them.

She says, "My enemies list became my prayer list."¹⁰

Today Kim Phuc works as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador and promotes peace, using her story to show God's love.

Phan Thi Kim Phuc is a daughter of the Most High.

The reward for loving your enemies is loving your enemies. Go deeper into the grace of God.

¹⁰ Kim Phuc.