

"Words Needing a Residence"

As a high school senior, I needed an elective. Because I was planning to go to college, my advisor suggested that I take typing. I thought, "Well there's an easy class," so I signed up for it. My sister, who is a year younger than I, had taken the course and typed fairly well. Throughout the course, my teacher instructed us *not* to look at our fingers as we typed. I disregarded her counsel, because it was easier to *look* at the keys on the typewriter. Besides, I thought I would *never* need the skill of typing; remember this was long before the advent of personal computers. I was fully aware of the correct *way* to type, but chose a different method, because I thought *my* technique was better.

As fate would have it, at the University of Georgia my degree program was a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism while majoring in Public Relations. A prerequisite to admission in the School of Journalism was to pass a typing proficiency test, which I failed miserably because without looking at my fingers, I made far too many errors. The alternative to passing the test was to take a typing course, which ate into my summer schedule. My high school teacher had told me the best method, but I chose the easier route. I had *heard* her, but the words found no *residence* in my brain. They went in one ear and out the other.

In our New Testament Lesson, Jesus says "But I say to you that listen." My typing teacher could have said the same thing to us; in essence, she did say that. Jesus was hoping that his words would find *residence* in the minds of those listeners that day. Indeed, Jesus still hopes that the words "Love your enemies," will be heeded.

Heeding these words when someone *has* no enemies is not a problem, but perhaps this basic principle of Christianity becomes one of the hardest biblical truths to place into practice. When people say that they love everybody, they reference a feeling. But love is also an action.

How easy is it for us to love the burglar who stole some irreplaceable items from our home? Or the person who, because of a conflict, fabricates a rumor about you? Or the convicted murderer that we see in the paper or on the evening news? Loving our enemies is difficult. It is *unnatural*. As children, we were taught to stay away from things that hurt us, like a hot stove, a needle, or an electric outlet. But enemies can hurt us too, so we generally try to avoid them. Jesus says to love them.

And society has taught us the fine art of retaliation. "If someone hits you, then hit them back." In the law given to Moses, we can find these words, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," (Exodus 21:24) meaning that we are to seek just compensation for losses incurred. This law was given because of a domino affect in the retaliation game. When one person hit another person, then revenge was sought. After the revenge was gained, then the first assailant would act again. The ultimate course of this process was annihilation. Eventually, someone would lose their life. So God gave the provision "an eye for an eye" so that the revenge would have a stopping point.

But in this similar passage found in Matthew, Jesus says that there is a better way to live. There is a higher plane for which to strive. And that is to love your enemies. It is so easy to hate those people who hate us. For years, many Americans had a certain animosity, maybe even hatred for the Germans and Japanese because of World War II. Then came the detesting of the Russians and Vietnamese, and now the suspicion of Iraqis and others in the Middle East. These are seen as the enemies of Americans. Yet Jesus says to love our enemies.

How do we love these who have done such horrible deeds to us? And the love of which Jesus speaks is an *active* love. It is not just an *emotion*; *behavior* is involved. And this is a *commandment*. Jesus does not say "Try to love your enemies," or "Have a loving spirit toward your enemies." Instead, he emphatically says **love** your enemies. And then he tells us *how* we are to perform this difficult, un-normal task.

We are to love our enemies by doing good to those who hate us. Our first impression is "Why?" If they hate us, good deeds will go unappreciated. If they despise us, we will be wasting our time. If we did good deeds for people who liked us or didn't even know us, at least the gesture would

be appreciated. But for those who *hate* us? This is ridiculous. Nobody in their right mind would attempt such an action.

Exactly. The expected response from someone who is hated is to hate in return. But to love hostile, critical people and to love them much more than they deserve to be loved is the epitome of grace. To invest one's life and substance in people who either cannot or will not reciprocate is an extension of grace.

Brennan Manning writes, "The American church today accepts grace in theory but denies it in practice. Our culture has made the word grace impossible to understand. We resonate to slogans such as: "There's no free lunch;" "You get what you deserve;" "You want money? Work for it;" "You want love? Earn it;" "You want mercy? Show you deserve it;" and "Do unto others before they do unto you." Grace is understood less and less." (Brennan Manning. The Ragamuffin Gospel. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishing. 1990)

Jesus cites ways to extend grace to those who hate us. This type of love typifies that no matter what that person *does* to us, we will never allow ourselves to desire anything but the person's highest good. This kind of love is not only something of the *heart*; there has to be a *will* to love in this manner. We *consciously* have to take the first step in living this kind of life, because it *is* unnatural.

Jesus says that if someone hits us in the face, we are to turn the other cheek. I can think of few insults anymore direct than to strike someone in the face. So are we encouraged just to stand there in total submission as a helpless doormat? No! We are to seize the initiative in a totally unexpected fashion by offering the *other* cheek. Hostility is to be met with active good-will expressed in deeds that are exact opposites of what is expected.

Violence breeds violence. "Take no prisoners!" is the anticipated response. Jesus says that turning the other cheek is an example of loving your enemies.

In 1983, our Congress voted to establish Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday as a national holiday, which is tomorrow. In leading the struggle for civil rights, Dr. King advocated nonviolent social change. He had studied the actions of Mahatma Gandhi in seeking reform in India. King was fascinated by Gandhi's philosophy of economic boycotts and nonviolent manners of resistance in making a point. In seeking civil rights for all Americans, Dr. King realized that lasting change could result from nonviolent strategies.

Those trained for the sit-ins were given the following rules, "Don't strike back if cursed and abused . . . Show yourself courteous and friendly at all times . . . Report all serious incidents to your leader in a polite manner. Remember love and nonviolence." Having received a Ph.D. from Boston University in Systematic Theology, Dr. King understood Jesus' words quite well. Students participated in training sessions in learning how to respond to violence and verbal abuse.

Other civil rights proponents, rivals of Dr. King, instilled an attitude of violence and hate into their supporters. This counsel hurt the cause and undermined what Dr. King was trying to accomplish. His message of nonviolence was not only reserved for students participating in sit-ins. In his most famous speech entitled "I Have a Dream," Dr. King encouraged the 250,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to turn the other cheek. The Baptist preacher from Georgia said, "But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into a palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force." (<http://www.mlkonline.net/dream.html>)

One year after his speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the age of 35, became the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. He received the highest peacemaking honor for embodying what Jesus calls *all* of us to do, namely to turn the other cheek.

Jesus also instructs those who will listen to be willing to give up your blazer if someone takes your overcoat. Clarence Jordan says to be willing to relinquish your undershirt if someone takes the shirt off your back. The persons in question are not *friends* asking to borrow a shirt or any other item for that matter. Instead, again we are talking about how to respond to our *enemies*. If someone hates you and requests your overcoat, then also offer him your blazer or sweater. Again, this action will be unexpected, but it will get the attention of the person. People recognize *actions* that are not ordinary. *Extra* acts of kindness are noticed. We have become so content with doing the *minimum* that we often forget to spread goodness wherever we are. The extra effort pays off in the long run.

In another example of how to love our enemies, Jesus says to give to anyone who asks of you, and if someone takes some of your property, do not ask for it again. Although these are two separate ideas, the point is that *people* should be more important than *possessions*. If the goal is to *love* our enemies, we need to recognize that even those who *hate* us matter more to God than anything that we own. Love requires us to be generous and openhanded. This lifestyle will eventually erase the status called "enemies," because they will recognize a more excellent way.

The bottom line for loving your enemies is the Golden Rule as found in verse 31. As mentioned earlier, it is not, "Do unto others *before* they do unto you." Neither is it "He who has the gold makes the rules." Instead, treat individuals in the respectful manner which you would like to be treated. Herein lies six of the Ten Commandments. If we can relate *to* others in a fashion which we expect *from* others, our worlds will be transformed. This kind of behavior is difficult to uphold on a consistent basis. We all have episodes where we have bit the bullet and placed our love for an enemy into action. Yet to perform these deeds day-in and day-out requires effort. It's not always easy.

Jesus reminds us that loving those who love us *already* is no great accomplishment. Doing good to those who expect it and/or appreciate it is *not* a notable feat. We are giving *and* receiving also. Compliments and gratitude for good deeds by those who *already* love us should come as no surprise. We exhibit positive behavior toward a deserving individual, and we in turn receive strokes from that person.

In verse 35, Jesus gives us in summary form what he hopes that people will hear. "Love your enemies, do good, and lend without expecting anything in return. If you do these things, then your reward will be great." This is, of course, a twofold reward: the one found here in realizing that true love faces no barriers *and* the reward in heaven. But greater than the reward is the *honor* of being called one of God's children.

If we demonstrate love for all people, *including* our enemies, then we are acting as God acts. Children's actions are molded by the behavior of their parents. The highest good we can achieve is to love our enemies, because we are then modeling the behavior of our Heavenly Father. As Jesus states, God is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. So when we love our enemies, we are acting Godly. This is how Jesus lived.

While hanging on the cross, he asked God to forgive those who placed him there. While facing the beatings from the hands of the Roman soldiers, he never retaliated. As they spit on him and called him names, he did not seek revenge. Instead, he gave his life as a ransom for their sins. He died on the cross for those who beat him up with their hands and with sticks.

But Jesus also died on the cross for you and for me. Jesus loved us even though we had no love for him. This unconditional love that God has for us is exhibited toward us by offering us second chances and remaining consistently loving toward us. God heaps grace on us at every turn, and we certainly do not deserve it. Our actions sometime are an affront to the promises made to us, and our rebellious behavior is like a slap in the face to the one who loves us. Yet God *still* loves us, even when we function as enemies. And we are to do likewise.

To those who will hear, Jesus says to love your enemies, *if* you want to be called one of God's Children. And for us, the phrase "love your enemies" truly are words needing a residence.