The Importance of Loving Your Enemies

David Wilkerson

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If you claim not to have any enemies, I'd like to make you an offer. I want to sign you up to write a book explaining how you managed to get this far in life without having a single person oppose you. Your book would surely be a bestseller.

You could describe how nobody has ever been jealous, envious or hostile toward you. You could explain how no one has ever tried to interrupt your plans, wreck your goals or derail your future. You could tell how no one has ever injured you, kept you from a desire, or orchestrated a destructive offense against you.

I don't mean to be flippant or sarcastic. But, the fact is, these things are what make someone your enemy. And each of us has had at least one of these experiences.

Of course, every Christian faces an arch enemy in Satan. Jesus tells us he's the enemy who sows evil tares in our lives (see Matthew 13:39). Likewise, the apostle Peter warns us about Satan: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Yet Jesus makes clear that we have nothing to fear from the devil. Our Lord has given us all power and authority over Satan and his demonic forces: "Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you" (Luke 10:19). Christ states clearly that the battle with Satan has already been won. We have within us the power to resist any attempt by the devil to devour us.

I want to focus instead on our trials with human enemies - flesh-and-blood opponents, people we may live with or work alongside. You see, when Peter uses the word "devour," the Greek meaning is "to attempt in any way to swallow you in one gulp." Peter is talking about any single issue - a struggle, trial or temptation - that could swallow you up and send you into depression, fear or discouragement.

You may be able to testify that you've won a great victory in Christ. You've successfully resisted all temptations and evil desires, all lusts and materialism, all loves of this world. But, at the same time, you may be devoured by an ongoing struggle with a human enemy. Someone has risen up against you - manifesting envy and bitterness, misrepresenting your actions and motives, smearing your reputation, opposing you at every turn, seeking to thwart God's purpose in your life.

This person's attack on you has robbed you of all peace. You've had to spend precious time explaining yourself and defending your actions. And after a while, the conflict began to consume all your thoughts, costing you many sleepless nights. Now you see it affecting your family, your relationships, even your physical health.

If this describes you, then you've already been devoured by an enemy - swallowed up by a trial brought on by your human adversary.

The Old Testament Seems to Support Our Secret Hopes That God Will Judge Our Enemies.

The Old Testament law called for vengeance - an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Its message seems to be, "You saw what my enemy did to me, Lord. Now, go after him."
It's easier for us to understand this attitude as we learn more about Israel's vicious enemies. The Egyptians' war cry was, "I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them" (Exodus 15:9). And God was faithful to avenge Israel against its enemies: "Thou didst blow with thy wind, the sea covered them: they sank as lead in the mighty waters" (15:10). "Thou stretchedst out thy right hand, the earth swallowed them" (15:12).

I can already hear some Christians saying, "That's what I want God to do to my enemies. Let him bring them down and swallow them up. After all, they've done to me what the Egyptians did to Israel. They've pursued me, blind-sided me, overtaken me. So I've got clear biblical grounds to ask God to blow my enemies away."

Yet, if we try to take comfort in the Old Testament’s way of dealing with enemies - even our unsaved enemies - we place ourselves back under the bondage of the law.

David made some strong statements about his enemies. He beseeched God, "Let all mine enemies be ashamed and sore vexed: let them return and be ashamed suddenly" (Psalm 6:10). He was saying, "Hound them, Lord - don't give them any sleep, because of what they did to me."

In one instance, David's enemy was a close friend, one of God's own people. David was hurt deeply by this friend, someone to whom he'd unburdened his soul. This man was David's prayer partner, a companion who shared his love for God. Yet this bosom friend turned on David, betraying him. And it left David hurt, angry, confused. "It was not an enemy that reproached me; then I could have borne it: neither was it he that hated me that did magnify himself against me; then I would have hid myself from him: but it was thou, a man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company" (Psalm 55:12-14).

David was saying, in essence, "If this had been some ordinary person, I could've handled it. But this was a close, godly friend. And that was too much for me to bear."

I believe with most Bible scholars that the friend who turned against David was Ahithophel, his advisor and confidant at one time. The two men sought each other's opinion on every issue of life. Each time David went up to God's house to worship, Ahithophel was by his side, acting as an oracle of the Lord to him. And David shared his heart openly with Ahithophel, thinking he had a spiritual friend.

Yet this same Ahithophel - seemingly so wise and spiritual, so without guile, so dedicated to David and his cause - suddenly turned on the king, becoming his enemy. In fact, Ahithophel grew so bitter toward David, he actually rallied people against him. He even enlisted David's own son, Absalom, in a plot to kill him.

David complained, "The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords" (Psalm 55:21). He was saying, "I thought Ahithophel was my friend. He spoke so piously, telling me he wanted what was best for me. But then he plunged a knife into my back."

The awful betrayal caused David to constantly look over his shoulder. He said, "Every day they wrest my words: all their thoughts are against me for evil. They gather themselves together, they hide themselves, they mark my steps, when they wait for my soul" (56:5-6). David moaned, "They're watching my every move, waiting to trick me."

Out of his awful hurt, depression and anger, David cried out impetuously: "Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell: for wickedness is in their dwellings, and among them" (55:15). He was saying, in other words, "Kill this traitor, Lord. Don't let him live out his days. Send him to hell for what he's done to me."

Yet, even as David said this, he portrayed himself as innocent. He testified, "As for me, I will call upon God...evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray" (55:16-17). David was saying, "Lord, you know I've done everything to try to please you. I haven't touched this man - yet he has turned against me. He's made himself my enemy."

These are the words of the same godly king who wept when his murderous enemy, Saul, was slain in battle. David ripped his clothes in grief and called upon his friends to fast and pray, crying, "A giant of Israel has fallen. Saul was a beautiful man of God." Yet now David said of Ahithophel, his former friend, "Kill him, God. Send him to hell, fast."
Then he justified his attitude by saying, "I'm a praying man. I'm on my knees always."

How often we Christians are just like David. In our awful hurt and depression, we cry out self-righteously against our enemies, "Lord, don't let them live another day."

Have You Ever Felt the Betrayal of a Close Friend?

Maybe you know someone who once told everybody he loved you. But then, zing - that friend stabbed you in the back. He turned on you, and now he's out to hurt you.

Perhaps you're separated or divorced from your mate, and now that spouse is knifing you. At one time you were convinced your mate loved and respected you. He stood by you at the altar, pledging to be yours for life. In the early days, his words were kind and loving, and you thought, "We're so close. He's my dearest friend."

But now he's forsaken you, perhaps for someone else. And he reproaching you - spewing out smooth talk, while behind your back he tries to destroy you. You cry yourself to sleep, thinking, "I thought I knew him. How could he turn out this way?"

Maybe your enemy is a close, personal friend - perhaps a ministry associate or Christian coworker. At one time, this friend seemed godly and guileless, and you trusted him. But, suddenly, for no apparent reason, he turned on you. You did nothing to cause his opposition to you. In fact, even as he reproaches you, you've remained friendly. Yet you can't believe the venom he spews about you to others - lies, hurtful words, manipulations. And the wound hurts even more deeply because he was your friend.

Some readers might ask, "Do such things actually happen in the body of Christ? I don't see how this could be true of any Christian." I'm sad to say, it's all too true.

I know a godly businessman who was invited to serve on the board of a Christian organization. At his first meeting, he was shocked by the politics and infighting he witnessed. He called me up, bewildered, asking, "Is it this way in every ministry? I expect this kind of thing in business, but I'm discouraged by what I saw and heard among these men. They can't sit down in the Spirit of Christ and work out their disagreements."

I tell you, it's impossible to be truly holy without total obedience to our Lord's command to love one another. Jesus said, "The whole law is fulfilled in this - that you love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself" (see Matthew 22:37-40). Indeed, God tests our love for him by the love we show to our Christian brothers and sisters. "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (1 John 4:20).

You can sing God's praises in church, you can serve food to the homeless - but if you carry a single grudge against anyone, your love for God is in vain. Scripture says if you harbor evil in your heart toward another, you're an outright hypocrite in God's eyes.

Loving those who've wounded us is not an option, but a command. "This is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment" (1 John 3:23). "These things I command you, that ye love one another" (John 15:17).

You may protest, "Lord, I'll serve you, praise you, worship you, sacrifice for you - but don't expect me to lay down this hurt. If you only understood the depths of pain I've been through, you wouldn't demand this of me. It's beyond my ability to do."

No - it is within your ability to do. Jesus says he has given us all power over the enemy. His Holy Spirit empowers us to forgive, even when we've been deeply wounded.

You see, as members of Christ's body, we're to react according to the directions given by our head, Jesus. Think about it: not a single one of your fingers moves, nor an eyelid blinks, without being directed by your brain. So, if Christ is our head, then all of his members must move according to his thoughts. And he has clearly expressed his thinking on this matter: "Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Are you acting according to Christ's wisdom? Or have you become your own head, independent of him? Have you
forgiven your enemies in love, even as Jesus has forgiven you? Or do you still hold a grudge, causing your sins to pile up against you?

I've Got Some Strong, Spiritual Castor Oil for You.

Often, God's command to love our enemies can seem like bitter, distasteful medicine. But, like the castor oil I had to swallow in my youth, it's medicine that heals. Many Christians aren't willing to take this medicine. They see it expressed in scripture, but they rarely abide by it. They still feel justified in despising their enemies.

Yet Jesus states very clearly: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44).

Was Jesus contradicting the law here? Not at all. He was reversing the spirit of flesh that had entered the law. At that time, Jews loved only other Jews. A Jew wasn't to shake hands with a Gentile, or even allow his robe to swish against an outsider's clothing. Yet this wasn't the spirit of the law. The law was holy, instructing, "If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: for thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee" (Proverbs 25:21-22).

Jesus also addressed the Old Testament law regarding hurts and injuries. He stated, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:38-39).

Under the Mosaic law, anyone who caused an injury was to be compensated in like manner - hurt for hurt, smiting for smiting. Yet this wasn't to be so under Christ's ministry of grace. Indeed, Jesus' command to love our neighbors was meant to include even our enemies.

You may ask, "Are we supposed to love evil people - abortion doctors, unscrupulous politicians, militant homosexuals who claim Jesus was gay? Doesn't the Bible tell us we're to cry out against sin and fiercely resist evildoers?" Yes, it does. But we are to resist these people's evil ways without hating their persons.

You may wish to claim David's prayer: "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? And am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies" (Psalm 139:21-22). Yet, even David finally discovered the gracious spirit of the law. He learned it's possible to hate someone's evil without hating the person. He wrote: "I hate the work of them that turn aside" (Psalm 101:3). "I hate every false way" (119:104). "I hate and abhor [their] lying" (119:163).

Consider Jesus' example. He faced the combined evil of every significant power in his day - government officials, political heads, church leaders. All of these people made themselves Christ's enemies, railing at him maliciously. Yet at the height of his pain - on the very brink of death - Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

Stephen had every right to resist those who stoned him. He could've pointed a finger at those corrupt religious leaders and said, "I'll see you on judgment day. You won't get away with this. God's going to punish you for this sin." But, instead, Stephen followed Jesus' example. He prayed, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60).

When Miriam rose up in complaint against her brother, Moses, she committed a sin worthy of death. And God was faithful to avenge Moses, striking his sister with leprosy. Yet Moses didn't rejoice in Miriam's suffering. It grieved his heart, and he begged God for her healing: "Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee" (Numbers 12:13).

Paul was flattered by hypocrites who then reviled, abused and slandered him. People from across the spectrum opposed Paul - evil politicians, entire societies, Roman sodomites who hated him for standing against their homosexual practices. Even churches rose up against him. Enraged teachers, jealous of the revelations Paul received, mocked and misquoted him. Others accused him of mishandling money.

Don't be mistaken - Paul hated these people's sin. Their deceptions grieved him, and he spoke out against their evil. But he never stopped loving the people or praying for their souls. He testified, "Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: being defamed, we entreat" (1 Corinthians 4:12-13). Paul was following Jesus' example. As Peter wrote of Christ, "Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously" (1 Peter 2:23).
We can hate the immoral actions of those in government. We can hate the sins of homosexuals, abortionists and all Christ despisers. But the Lord commands us to love them as people - people for whom Jesus died. And he commands us to pray for them.

Yet, instead, we often joke at their expense. I have told and laughed at many jokes about our President. I believe his stand on late-term abortion is an abomination in God's eyes, and it makes my blood boil. But that does not excuse me from taking his eternal soul seriously. If at any time I despise a person rather than the principles behind that person, I'm not truly representing Christ.

I believe Jesus' name has been dishonored by the way many Christians have reacted to evildoers. We've railed against those whom we should be praying for. So-called believers have bombed abortion clinics, murdered abortion doctors, shaken angry fists at gay marchers. None of that is the Spirit of Christ. Our power is on our knees, not in shaking our fists or leveling angry judgments.

Now Let's Talk About Those Enemies Within the Church.

How are we to react to Christians who've made themselves our enemies? Jesus commands us to love them, by doing three things: 1. Bless them. 2. Do good to them. 3. Pray for them. "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

Let's review our lives in light of these three things, to see if we're being obedient to Christ, our head:

1. "Bless them that curse you." What, exactly, does it mean to bless? The Greek word for bless here implies, "speaking only what is good and edifying, out loud, with the mouth." We're not just to think good things about our enemies, but to speak them openly.

I have truly failed at this command. I remember an occasion when some people I dearly loved rose up against me, persecuting and reproaching me. It was the worst pain I ever endured, consuming my thoughts night and day. Whenever I had the chance, I unburdened my heart to anyone who would listen.

One day a dear couple in ministry asked to have lunch with my wife, Gwen, and me. No sooner had we sat down than I began unloading my burden on them. I told them every detail of my hurt - every lie told, every wound inflicted. That couple never knew what hit them. An hour or so later, they left bewildered. As I looked at Gwen, I saw discouragement in her eyes. That's when it dawned on me - I'd done all the talking.

I found out later this dear couple had been hurting - and that's why they were desperate to meet with us. Yet I never even asked how they were doing. They weren't able to get in a word edgewise - and they left empty, dry, unedified. If only I'd obeyed Jesus' command to bless my persecutors by speaking good of them, this couple might have received a blessing. Instead, they walked away downcast in spirit.

2. "Do good to them that hate you." What does it mean to do good to those who oppose us? The Greek meaning here implies "honesty plus recovery." Jesus is saying, in essence, "Do everything in your power to seek your enemy's healing and recovery from Satan's snare. You know that what this person is doing to you is evil. Yet your focus isn't to be on your own hurt, but on the deception of your enemy's soul."

Christ is actually commanding us to envision the soul-damning condition of our persecutors. We aren't to take comfort in the thought that God will one day avenge their sins against us. Instead, we're to pray for them. We're to try to tear down any walls that might damn them, and put forth every effort to rebuild a bridge to them.

Jesus promised, "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:23). To remit means "to totally forget, renounce, cast aside." Of course, no one can remit someone's sins against God. Only Christ can do this, through his work at the cross. But we can remit those sins that have been committed against us. Jesus is saying, "If you'll remit that sin against you, I'll remit it in heaven. I'll forgive your enemy on your account."

Christ's command here is very simple: "Make the first move. Don't wait - don't miss the opportunity - because your enemy's soul could slip into eternity still carrying his sin. You be the first to seek reconciliation. Of course, your kindness may be rejected. But if it's accepted, you can stand on judgment day knowing your enemy wasn't judged and damned because of his sin against you."
3. "Pray for them which despitefully use you." We see this command illustrated in the duties of the high priest. First, the law required the priest to slay the sacrifice and place it on the altar, to deal with the people's sin. And, second, the priest was to pray for the congregation, to act as an intercessor on their behalf.

This priestly work was demonstrated at the cross. Jesus did both: First, he made the sacrifice for sin, with his own body. Then he prayed for the forgiveness of the people, including his own persecutors.

And, right now, Christ is interceding for your enemies. "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). Jesus is an advocate even for those who have used and persecuted you. So, if he is interceding for their souls, how can you remain an enemy to them? It's simply impossible.

How Important Is It to Forgive And Bless Our Enemies?

Paul writes, "Give place unto wrath" (Romans 12:19). He's saying, in short, "Suffer the wrong. Lay it down and move on. Get a life in the Spirit." However, if we refuse to forgive the hurts done to us, we have to face these consequences:

1. We'll become guiltier than the person who inflicted our wound.
2. God's mercy and grace toward us will be shut off. Then, as things begin to go wrong in our lives, we won't understand them, because we'll be in disobedience.
3. Our persecutor's vexations against us will continue to rob us of peace. He'll become the victor, succeeding in giving us a permanent wound. And he'll go his way laughing while we continue stewing in anger.
4. Because Satan succeeds in driving us to thoughts of revenge, he'll be able to lead us into deadlier sins. And we'll commit transgressions far worse than these.

The writer of Proverbs advises, "The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression" (Proverbs 19:11). In other words, we're to do nothing until our anger has subsided. We're never to make a decision or follow through with any action while we're still angry.

Moreover, we bring glory to our heavenly father whenever we overlook hurts and forgive the sins done to us. To do so builds character in us. We've already read that if we react as Jesus did, "The Lord shall reward thee" (Proverbs 25:22). When we forgive as God forgives, he brings us into a revelation of favor and blessing we've never known.

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