

Love Your Enemies

In Matthew 5 Jesus instructs, "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven." A little girl wrote to her pastor: Dear Pastor, I heard you say to love our enemies. I am only six and do not have any yet. I hope to have some when I am seven. Love, Jennifer. That may be your attitude. "I don't have any enemies. I love everybody and everybody loves me." Maybe so, but there may be persons whom we secretly harbor ill feelings toward whom we have never thought to classify under Jesus' definition as enemies, yet in a sense, they are enemies. Some enemies may arise because we try to do the right thing. Jesus never said, "Do not have enemies." Both Mother Teresa & Billy Graham, as respected as they were, had enemies. We can't help having enemies, but we can help how we respond to our enemies spiritually! There are three ways you can respond to an enemy. You can retaliate, resent, or release.

First, We Can Retaliate. A man was informed by his doctor that he had rabies but he had waited so long to go to the doctor that nothing could be done about his condition. After telling the sad news, the doctor left. Later, he stopped back by to check on the patient who was writing something on a piece of paper. "Are you writing a will?" the doctor asked. "No," said the man, "I'm making a list of all the people I'm going to bite!" Spiritually, retaliation is unholy & deadly. Retaliation does permanent damage not only to our enemy but to us as well.

Second, We Can Secretly Harbor Resentment. The problem with harboring negative feelings toward someone else is, what those feelings do to us. Resentment is known as the "Emotion of Justice," as it is usually accompanied by the sense that we need to hold on to our resentment in order to take a moral stance on unacceptable behavior. Giving up our resentment can often feel like letting the other person off the hook or condoning their behavior. Two distinguishing features of resentment are that it causes us to go over and over the situation in our minds and that it lingers over time. We are often initially so shocked by what has happened to us that the disappointment, frustration, or anger we feel becomes lodged and it's difficult to move on. That resentment literally eats at us and leaves us bitter and leads to an erosion of our physical, emotional & spiritual health!

Third, Jesus says there is a better way to deal with our enemies, we can love them and release the hurt we carry. For our own sake, that is the only way we can deal with our enemies. When Kenneth was eighteen years old his father died. After his father died his mother and he tried to run the service station. As he worked, he noticed a large file of debts that had accumulated through the years. Since his father had died, people were refusing to pay what they owed on credit. Statements were sent and they were ignored. After a year and a half, Kenneth and his mother sold the service station and got out of the business. They kept that file of debts, in hopes that those who owed them would do the right thing someday pay. One Sunday afternoon Kenneth's mother walked into the room with that file of debts in her hand and announced. "Son there is something that is eating at me about these debts, and I have decided to do something about them." Kenneth asked, "What are you going to do?" She said, "I am going to forgive them." "She then carried the file out into the backyard and gathered some sticks and made a fire on an old cook-out grill. Then she took one out, read their name out loud, tore the debt in half, and said, "I forgive you," and dropped it into the fire. She looked at Kenneth and asked, "Son, would you want to try it?" Kenneth said, "I don't think I can." His mother said, "Son, you don't have a choice about it, if you want to be forgiven, you must forgive them." Kenneth stood there in silence watching her burning those debts. Finally, he slowly reached into the file, got out a debt, read their name out loud, tore it up and dropped it into the fire. It took a good thirty minutes to complete the task, but

when it was finished it was as if a heavy burden had been lifted. As he forgave, he was forgiven. "Because of this demonstration in forgiveness," says Kenneth, "that phrase in the Lord's prayer, '...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...' has taken on a whole new meaning."

Forgiving our enemies is the first step toward loving them. You say, "But pastor, what they did to me was too horrible. I can't forgive." And I ask, who is your anger and resentment hurting most of all? My guess is that it is worse on you than it is your enemy. Why not begin with a clean slate from this day forward? Maybe you need to go home today and make a list of everyone you feel is your enemy, those who have hurt you, caused you grief and difficulty and offer them to Christ. While you are at it ask yourself, Am I on someone else's list? If it's possible, reach out and ask for their forgiveness! For we were once we were an enemy of God but through Christ, we were forgiven and restored. God is calling each of us to the ministry of Love & Reconciliation!