

# **Did Jesus Really Say That?**

## **4. The Best of Enemies**

Nov. 15, 2020

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Welcome to week 4 of our series on the Sermon on the Mount – the core teaching of Jesus about what it means to follow him. Jon Tyson said, “We have done everything in our relationship with Jesus over the years. We have taken him personally, politically, culturally, religiously, but somehow we have avoided taking him seriously.”

This is a series for those of us who want to take Jesus seriously. We are not going to take *ourselves* seriously – we will easily laugh at ourselves. We are not going to take life too seriously and be grim and scowling. The fruit of the Spirit is JOY, so Jesus followers smile a lot. We’re going to take *Jesus* seriously -- which means that when Jesus says to do something, we will do it.

Now, I have to admit that today’s topic is a hard one for me, because I don’t feel like I’ve mastered it. Every preacher who preaches through the Bible has moments like this; we come to a passage in God’s Word that we need to preach even as we struggle with it. I don’t struggle to *agree* with the teaching; I believe it is true and from God. I’m saying that it doesn’t come naturally for me to do it. Because today’s topic is **loving our enemies**. Did Jesus really say to do that? Yes, he did --- in chapter 5 of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:38 Jesus said,

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’*

Most people are comfortable with this idea – it seems fair. You hurt me, I hurt you back the same way. The problem with that is when the hurt person determines the payback, they always want it to be higher. And then there is no end to the cycle of revenge. Revenge is not a pathway to peace. So Jesus raises the bar on how we are to react when we’re hurt.

*<sup>39</sup> But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. <sup>41</sup> If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. <sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I tell you, **love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you,*

We might think, “Loving my enemies is not a big deal for me, because I don’t have any enemies; I am not out to get anyone.” I know what you mean; I feel the same way. However, when Jesus says “enemies” – he is not talking about people we don’t like, he is talking about people who don’t like *us*. Verse 39 says that an enemy is someone who slaps you, sues you, forces you to do what you don’t want to do. Love *those* people. Jesus didn’t say “tolerate them” – he didn’t say “stay away from them” – he said “love your enemies.” That does not come naturally to us humans. Yet, you’ll never guess what the most popular verse of the early church was: that’s right: Matthew

5:44. It was quoted more often than any other by the early Christian writers: in 26 places by 10 different writers in the first 300 years of Christianity. That makes it *the* most celebrated command among the first Christians. It was the “John 3:16” of the early church. If they had bumper stickers on their chariots, they would have read, “Matthew 5:44.” If they had football games back then they would have held up signs that read, “Matthew 5:44 – Love your enemies!”

Loving enemies was the primary mark of a follower of Jesus – it identified them as Christians. In verse 45 Jesus said “love your enemies *that you may be children of your Father in heaven*. The early Christians were known as people who would not hit you back if you struck them. They were the ones who would serve you if you had abused them. What if you and I were known to be people like that today? What if we were known as the ones who will not respond when we’re attacked on social media? What if we are known as the ones who won’t speak badly about those who hold different political views – who won’t fuel the fire of that anger? What if we were to post “Matthew 5:44” on our social media pages and people would say, “Yep, that describes who they are – they love people who don’t like them.” Then we would stand out -- in a *good way!*

Patrick Greene lives in San Antonio, Texas. He was an atheist and he did not like Christians. At one point he threatened to sue Henderson County over their Christmas manger display at the courthouse. But all of that changed in March of 2012 when Greene learned that he needed surgery for a detached retina. He didn't have the money to pay for the surgery, and he had to give up his cab driving job. Then Jessica Crye heard about Greene's situation. She was a Christ follower, and she mobilized her church to reach out to Greene. When they contacted Greene, he said, "If you really want to contribute something, we need groceries." Greene thought that if anything, he'd see \$50, or at most \$100. But a few days later, the church sent a check for \$400. More checks soon followed. The flabbergasted Greene said, "I thought I was in the Twilight Zone. These people are acting like what the Bible says a Christian does." Now, rather than try to remove the manger display, Greene said he wanted to add a star for the top of the Nativity scene. However, Greene added, "You people can figure out how to plug it in."<sup>1</sup> Love those who don't like us – that makes an impact.

Other religions taught that people should love their neighbors. They even taught forgiveness for those who wronged them. But actually *loving your enemy*? Only Jesus and his followers took love this far. Why? Because this is how God loves us.

**Romans 5:10** *For while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.*

Even when we rebelled against him, God loved us enough to die for us.

When we love people who they treat us badly, we are taking after our Heavenly Father. God lavishes good things even on people who don't believe in him or respect him:

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<sup>1</sup> *Preaching Today*

*vv. 45: He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

Without rain, nothing can grow. God could say, “You don’t acknowledge me? Fine, then I won’t send rain; see how you like a drought.” But he doesn’t do that – he sends life-giving rain on people who love him and on people who don’t.

*<sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?*

Jesus is pointing out that loving our enemies is not natural.

When someone attacks us, the natural response might be:

> *to get back at them – to take revenge*

But that just locks us in a cycle of retaliation and anger

> *we might feel like avoiding the person and burying the memory of the hurt*

But that leads to inner bitterness, which does violence to our own souls.

Those might be natural responses, but Jesus calls us to a supernatural response. He says in *verse 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not saying “shape up” – he is saying, “be transformed.” The Spirit will give us the power to do what Jesus calls us to do. Loving our enemies is not about feeling all warm and fuzzy toward them. Jesus did not command us to *feel* a certain way about those who don’t like us, he commanded us to *act* a certain way. Jesus gives us two practical ways to respond supernaturally.

## **Two ways to love our enemies:**

### **1. Pray the best for them**

Jesus said *pray for those who persecute you, - Matthew 5:44*

No matter how we feel about someone who doesn’t like us, we can pray for them. Of course, praying for them doesn’t mean to pray that their teeth fall out and their dog runs away. That’s praying a curse on them. Instead, we’re to pray a blessing; which means praying for good things to happen in their lives. That’s not natural, but it’s powerful. Something happens in us when we pray repeatedly for someone to be blessed and have good things happen to them. We can’t stay bitter at them. You’ll start to see the person as God does. Praying a blessing on others blesses us. And it might change them. The good thing is that you can pray for people from a safe distance. And that might be necessary if someone is still actively trying to harm you.

Millions of persecuted Christians around the world are not able to pray for their enemies from a safe distance. For example, 3 believers in Iran have been arrested and sentenced to 10 years in prison for attending a house church. They are scheduled to be moved to a prison known for torturing prisoners. And yet, one of their co-workers, who was able to escape the country, said, “We pray for the rulers, for those who harassed us, insulted and slandered us, humiliated and ridiculed us, tortured and destroyed us,

harmed us and our families, confiscated our property. We pray for them and forgive them.” The mark of a follower of Jesus.

Open Doors is a ministry to the global persecuted church. They work in closed countries where believers are imprisoned and killed for their faith. They made a list of what to pray for those who persecute us. As I give you this list – consider, is there someone I should be praying for in this way?

### **1. Pray and ask God to radically show up in the lives of persecutors.**

Remember that Paul was once the greatest persecutor of Christians. He was on his way to bring violence against believers when Jesus showed up on the Damascus Road. God transformed this man who was known for his hatred of Christians into the greatest church planter and author of much of the New Testament. Pray God changes your enemy.

### **2. Pray against the evil but for our enemies.**

Pray that the hurt stops and that your enemy is blessed. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Your enemy is not the person, your enemy is the force behind the actions. We want to overcome the evil, but not the person.

### **3. Pray that God would forgive them.**

Before Paul was a believer, he oversaw the execution of Stephen. While Stephen was being killed he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Acts 7:60) – just like Jesus did. That prayer for forgiveness may have set the stage for Paul’s conversion a short while later.

### **4. Pray as if God loves the persecutor as much as He loves you because He does.**

Who is God calling you to pray for? Is there a painful memory, a broken connection? Let’s take a moment right now to pray for those who want to harm us. If you truly have no one come to mind, then please pray for the persecuted church in Iran and China.

**The second step Jesus commands is:**

### **2. Do your best for them**

Jesus said give more than is asked of you. He said, for example, *If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.* That was a reference to the fact that, by law, the Roman soldiers occupying Israel at the time could ask a Jewish civilian to carry their gear for them for up to one mile. Everyone listening resented that. But Jesus said, if asked to carry it one mile, double what’s required and carry it two miles. In other

words, do good to those who don't do good to you. The earliest followers of Jesus did this.

One of our Crossroads members was rejected and divorced by her husband years ago. To put it plainly, he was not a pleasant man. He alienated everyone around him and died alone. He had no friends or relatives willing to organize a funeral service for him. So his ex-wife chose to do it. Others asked her, "Why are you doing this for a guy who wasn't kind to you and rejected you?" After all, planning a funeral is something people do for those they love. She did not think it was strange. She is a disciple of Jesus who is taking her cues from her Heavenly Father. She was loving her enemy – doing good for someone who didn't show her love.

"Love your enemies" --- yes, Jesus really said that. He spoke about it like he expected we could actually do it. But Jesus didn't teach us to love our enemies just for their good. It is also for our own good--to keep us from becoming the enemy by retaliating."<sup>2</sup> And Jesus didn't just tell us to love our enemies, he did it himself. He turned the other cheek as enemies – people who hated him --- ripped out his beard and ripped open his back with a whip. He went the extra mile when he carried the cross up a hill, and he prayed for those who were stripping him of his dignity, and who were inflicting torture on him when he hung on the cross and said, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

We are not called to die on a cross for people who don't like us; we're just called to pray for them and serve them when appropriate. This isn't easy. It is beyond our power to do, but as we ask God, he'll help us. As we take those steps we'll find that the Holy Spirit fills us with a different kind of love.

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<sup>2</sup> Russ Ford, death row chaplain