

Loving Enemies – Matt. 5:43-48

Practicing the Presence of God #6

The 1st settlers in the area now known as New York City were the Dutch. It was a Dutchman named Peter Minuit who purchased Manhattan Island from Native Americans in 1626 for the equivalent of \$24. The settlement that was formed there was called New Amsterdam, and it became the seat of government for the colony of the New Netherlands.

The British, however, became quite perturbed over the presence of New Amsterdam. They looked at this Dutch colony as an obtrusive interruption in their series of coastal possessions. So in 1664, the British sent out a naval force to capture this Dutch colony. Completely out-gunned, the Dutch surrendered without a shot, and the English took over control of the area.

But with a change of hands there still continued to be resentment and hostility. The Dutch resented the British who had taken over their territory. The English resented the fact that while they technically controlled the area, practically speaking it still maintained its Dutch influence. With the military threat over, the hostilities took a more subtle, indirect form. The English soldiers began to make fun of the Dutch, calling them names and the Dutch, of course, reciprocated. Some of these phrases that originated in the 17th century have continued their use and have almost become colloquial expressions. A Dutch uncle is one who is stern and critical. A Dutch treat is no real treat at all. Some

people have even referred to getting into trouble as getting into Dutch. And so on with many other phrases as well dating back to the 17th century. But it's interesting that the most common jibe that has continued to this day is not commonly recognized as being a derogatory name at all. You see, the Dutch made far better cheese than the English did, so they started calling the English soldiers, John Cheese. Of course, they pronounced their jibe with their Dutch accents - YanKees. When the New York Yankees take the field with their pin stripe uniforms, I wonder how many of them realize that the name that they are bearing was originally intended as a term of derision and ridicule, a term expressing hostility and enmity. John Cheese. Yan kees.

Hostilities and enmity are as old as the human race itself. From the time that Cain set his hateful eye on his brother, Abel, people have been plagued by ill feelings towards others. Nations have hated nations. Races have resented other races. Families have feuded with other families. From the schoolyard fights of youth to the career backstabbing in the board room as adults, the methodology might become more sophisticated, the names more refined, but the enmity is still there.

One of the many distinctive characteristics of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ was his attitude and actions towards His enemies. The Scribes and Pharisees had the motto to love your friends and hate your enemies. So they felt perfectly justified in criticizing Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners because they were the enemy. But Jesus came with a completely different ethic. He

taught love for everyone. He loved not only his friends, but He loved His enemies as well. And He taught His followers that they should love even their enemies. Jesus even went so far as to say that love would be a distinguishing mark of his followers. On the eve of His departure, Jesus said to his followers:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34,35)

If we practice the presence of God in our lives, the love of the Lord Jesus Christ will flow through us to others. We should be lead to treat others like Jesus Himself would treat them. We should be lead to not only love God with all of our hearts in worship, but to also love our neighbors as ourselves as well. And, yes, as we become more and more like Jesus Christ, we will even begin to love those whom we consider to be our enemies.

Now in that famous passage that we commonly refer to as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave his disciples a 2 fold command with regard to their enemies with a reason for his command. Let's look first of all at the 2 fold command. READ Matthew 5:43,44:

"You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

The 1st of the 2 fold command is to love your enemies.

It is assumed that we would naturally love our family and friends, but Christ's standard is that we are even to love our enemies.

What is love for our enemies? Obviously, the context of Christ's command indicates that love for our enemies isn't having overwhelming, nostalgic feelings of affection for them. Sometimes when we are at a birthday party or a memorial service for someone we love, our heart is filled with such fond feelings and memories that tears well up in our eyes.

We shouldn't expect that sort of thing to happen with regards to those who are committed to destroy us.

Nor is love for our enemies just rolling over and giving our enemies anything that they want. Many people today mistake love for a kind of gentle passivity. This is not the love of God. God's love was not a passive love. God's love remains very active. And God's love is tough at times as well. The writer of Hebrews said,

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

(Heb. 12:5,6).

God's love in the past caused Jacob to limp around for the remaining years of his life with a bad hip so that he could learn to rely wholly upon God's strength. God's love in the past caused Jonah to spend 3 days and nights in the belly of a whale so that he could learn the importance of obedience. God's love in the past

caused the Israelites to live in exile from their land for 70 years becoming slaves to the Babylonians. God's love ,at times is tough love. But it is always for the best interest of the one who is being loved. You see, true love is a commitment to act in the best interest of the one who is being loved. Most often love would lead us to give a hug and a pat on the back because security and affirmation are important needs that we all have. But sometimes love leads us to give a pat down a little lower because instruction and correction is also a need that we have. Whatever our need, true love seeks to meet that need.

That's the reason for Jesus using the illustrations of the sun and rain as examples of God's love. We need sunshine and rain to be sustained in life. Without the sun and rain there would be no food and no life. So God in His love meets these needs - and God meets these needs for His enemies as well as His children.

Let me give 2 examples from the Bible of how we can show love even for our enemies - one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

As Moses was giving some assorted laws on righteousness and neighborliness in Exodus 23, he gave this regulation found in verse 5: "If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it."

Now here is an example from the O. T. of practicing the presence of God in allowing His love to flow through one's life. A person is out on an errand - perhaps going to town for some supplies. On the way he

sees another person who hates him in trouble. The person has loaded up his donkey so much that the donkey has collapsed under the weight of the burden.

Instead of gloating at his enemies' misfortune and perhaps scolding the enemy for being so cruel to put so much of a burden on his donkey, practicing the presence of God would lead him to stop and help his neighbor in trouble even though he might be an enemy.

To put this text in a more modern setting,

imagine a neighbor who is critical and mean having a flat tire down the road. You can tell as you pull up beside him that he has no spare and is stuck. Practicing the presence of God would lead us to stop and give the neighbor a ride or help him change the tire rather than driving on by with a smug smile on our face.

A New Testament example is found in Romans 12:17-20:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

It's not possible to live at peace with everybody. The Bible is realistic enough to recognize that fact. There are people who are so filled with hatred and evil that they will consider kindness to be weakness and try

to take advantage of it. Terrorists in the world today are an example of these types of people. But as, much as possible, we should live at peace with everybody. In other words, it shouldn't be our fault that hostilities continue. The example is found in giving food to an enemy who is hungry or giving drink to an enemy who is thirsty. Meeting our enemies' needs in love is like heaping burning coals on his head. This saying is

misunderstood by many today because we are so far removed from the pre-industrial culture of Biblical times. Many interpret this as giving food or water to an enemy because that will really get his goat. But this certainly doesn't capture the spirit of the passage. Back in Biblical times, they didn't have gas or electric stoves in their homes. They had to start a fire in their ovens to bake their daily bread in the morning. Well, cities soon learned that it was more convenient and efficient to have a single source of fire for the whole community than for each individual household to have to start their own fires. Remember, they didn't have matches or bic lighters either. A hired fire-keeper would keep a fire continually burning. When someone needed to start a fire in her oven to bake some bread, she could go to the town fire-keeper who would give her a coal or two to start the fire. She would then carry those coals (in a clay pot on her head as the custom was) back to her home and start a fire in her oven. Well, say you had already baked your bread for the day and you had a whole oven full of coals left over that were just beginning to cool down. It was recognized as the neighborly thing to do to flag

down the person who was returning from the fire-keeper and offer to pour your coals on her head as well. If she got enough coals, she wouldn't even have to start another fire to bake her bread. Paul said that offering food or drink to an enemy was like giving them extra coals for their fire - it was going a little bit out of your way to bless a person with a kind deed. That's what Jesus would do, and that's what He expects His followers to do as well. As we practice the presence of God in our lives, we will be channels of God's love to others in our daily lives - we will even be lead to love our enemies.

The 2nd of the 2 fold command is to pray. *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*

Now, again, in the context here it is clear that Jesus is instructing prayer for the benefit of our enemies not prayer for their destruction or annihilation. There is a time for God's judgment and He will take care of that. And God has ordained the government to protect its citizens and wield the sword of the Lord in executing His judgment at times. But on a personal level, and that's what we are really talking about in the Sermon on the Mount, God desires for His children to pray for others, to even pray for their enemies.

Now I believe that there is at least a 2 fold reason why it is important for us to pray for our enemies.

First, as we pray for our enemies, we constantly bring them before our minds so that we are aware of their presence. The most natural thing for us to do is to so totally ignore those who do not agree with us that we

actually begin to block them out of our minds. The most natural thing for us to do is to so avoid those who are opposed to us that we begin to live as if they do not exist. We eventually become only aware of our friends who surround us continually. If we live like this for a long period of time our world closes in more and more until we are finally living in this small, artificial world totally unaware of the great needs that remain out among those who are spiritually lost.

But a 2nd thing happens as well as we pray for our enemies. We find that more positive feelings for them begin to grow and develop in our lives. It is very difficult to continually pray for someone towards whom we have hostile feelings. One of two things will probably happen. We will either stop praying for them, or those angry feelings will lose their edge and begin to soften. So Jesus Christ commanded His followers to pray for their enemies. We will naturally pray for our friends - but we are to also pray for our enemies as well.

Many of our church members saw a clear example of loving enemies this past Thursday when we went to see "The End of the Spear". This movie told the story of missionaries who were willing to even lay down their lives so that tribal groups in Ecuador could hear the saving gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This movie reminded me the Huachine people who are one of the tribal groups living in the South Sea islands. In the year 1818, Tamatoe, the king of the Huachine tribe, became a Christian. As he grew in the Lord through the teachings of the missionaries who had lead him to Christ, he began to be burdened for some of the

neighboring tribes around him, tribes with whom he had been in constant conflict with before. So Tamatoe began to pray that God would work in the hearts and lives of those who were his enemies. One day after weeks of prayers had been offered, Tamatoe learned that one of these tribes had been plotting an attack against his people. At first, Tamatoe was very upset thinking that God hadn't been hearing his prayers. But then he began to realize that this plot was a part of God's answer to his prayers. God lead Tamatoe to organize his warriors and make a surprise raid on this nearby warring tribe. The Huachine completely surprised their adversaries and captured them unawares. But instead of killing them as he would have ordered before, Tamatoe brought them to his village to a large feast that the Huachine women had already prepared. It shouldn't be a surprise that Tamatoe's rival was so amazed and impressed that the neighboring king became a Christian. Soon all of the other members of the neighboring tribe became Christians as well. They burned their idols and maintained friendly relations with the Huachine tribe from that time on. Now praying for our enemies doesn't guarantee that our enemies are going to change in all cases. Often they will, but at other times they might even become more hardened and obstinate in their hostility. But praying for our enemies does guarantee that we are going to change in all cases. We will become more like the Lord Jesus Christ whose 1st prayer from the cross was for the forgiveness of his enemies, and we will experience the presence of Christ in a new way.

Now having seen Christ's 2 fold command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, let's briefly look at our Savior's reason for giving such a seemingly unnatural instruction. *that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* (Matt. 5:45)

Now it is not through loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us that we become sons of our Father in heaven for salvation is by grace through faith, not by any works. But it is through loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us that we are recognized as being sons of our Heavenly Father. You see there is nothing that more accurately pictures God in heaven than doing good for enemies because that is exactly what God does all of the time. God could cause it to rain on the farms of his children and just be cloudy over the farms of the unsaved with no rain ever falling if He wanted to. I mean, .God has done that in the past so we know that He could do it if He wanted to. Do you remember the time when the children of Israel were slaves in Egypt and God caused a devastating hailstorm to fall on the Egyptian land? But the hail miraculously stopped right at the border of Goshen where the children of Israel were living. God could even cause the sun to shine just on his children if He wanted to. Do you remember the time when God caused thick darkness to fall over all of the land of Egypt while the Israelites basked in the life-giving sunlight? When God reigns down judgments as He sometimes does, He is able to

pinpoint those judgments exactly where He wants to put them. The plagues over Egypt were judgments sent by God to prove Himself as superior to the gods of Egypt so that his people would be freed from their slavery. But the Lord Jesus Christ says here that the goodness of God often comes with no such discrimination even though it also could. God causes his sun to shine on the evil and good alike; He gives his rain to the righteous and the unrighteous alike. The point that Jesus is making here is that we prove ourselves to be sons of God when we act in a similar way towards our enemies. The best testimony that we can have is to love and pray for our enemies.

So when we practice the presence of God in our lives by loving others around us, we are practically showing the world that we are sons of the living God.

8 times Uwe Homer applied his son to the University of East Berlin and 8 times his child was rejected. There was no logical reason for the young man's application to be rejected. He had graduated top of his class in High School. But even though no reason was given by the admissions officials at the University of East Berlin, Uwe Homer knew why his son was continually being rejected and everyone else in the community knew it as well. You see, Uwe Homer was the pastor of the evangelical Lutheran church at Lobetal, a suburb of East Berlin. Pastor Homer's child was being blackballed. Margo Honiker the minister of education who was also the wife of East Germany's Premier, Herr

Honiker, was making sure that the Christian did not have the opportunity for an education that might bring advancement in life. Then life suddenly changed for the Honikers. The Berlin Wall came down. Herr Honiker was suddenly dismissed from his position of power in an unceremonial manner. Charges were issued against him - he was indicted for criminal activities during his reign of terror as the Premier of East Germany. It was

the middle of winter, the end of January, and the Honikers were evicted from their luxurious palace in Vandlitz, an exclusive suburb of palatial homes reserved for the VIPs in the Communist Party. The tables had suddenly turned for the Honikers. No longer did they have any power. They suddenly found themselves homeless, without resources, with no place to go. The general populace had turned against the communist party and had no sympathy for them. And their former friends, fellow comrades in the Communist party, also turned their backs on them. No one wanted to identify with the Honikers - they had become social outcasts.

There was only one family that stepped up to help the Honikers from freezing and starving to death in the cold. It was the Lutheran Pastor Uwe Homer. When, he heard of the Honiker's plight, he gathered his family around the dining room table and asked them what they thought Jesus would do. Even though they had been the power that had refused university admission 8 times to the student with the highest grade point average in high school because he was a Christian, the Honikers were

invited to live with that same Christian family. The Homers housed them, fed them, and clothed them until they could get back on their feet again. It shouldn't surprise us that both Herr and Margo Honiker became followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. It shouldn't surprise us because they witnessed some true sons of God at work in the Homer family.

If we are to practice the presence of God in our lives this week, then we will love our neighbors as ourselves. But we will even go farther than that - we will also love and pray for our enemies. That's what Jesus did - and that is what He will do again through us if we let him. And as we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, we will prove ourselves to be sons of the true and living God.