

## Love your enemy

"God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked." Jesus said so. (Lk 6:35) Hmm. The ungrateful and wicked. Not that we who see ourselves as disciples of Jesus weren't at one time included in that category. But that God is KIND to them. That's the kicker.

Every Christian needs an enemy. Why? Like Father, like son. I don't mean to minimize the distress brought about by an enemy. His actions may have wounded us deeply. But Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount, "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, 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. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt 5:43-48)

Without an enemy, our growth will be stunted. The enemy (the one who dislikes us and wishes us harm) provides the occasion for us to become something we otherwise could not become. We who trust Jesus have been born by the Holy Spirit into a new realm of existence and have become, in fact, new creatures. Unlike learning to speak Spanish, let's say, which will always be something added onto our lives, loving our enemies, if it happens, will flow from a change in our spiritual DNA. We have become butterflies and are no longer caterpillars. Loving our enemies is part of what spiritual butterflies do. Even if a large part of our flesh still rebels at the thought, we will only live in a synchronized fashion with our true, inner self, if we love our enemies. Why? Because God is love and we are of God.

Our language here is very important. Being a "child of God" is rather loosely tossed around in our culture. Even we Christians, who have access to The Book, sometimes use this kind of language about all other people. That is not what the Bible teaches. All human beings are NOT children of God. All human beings are indeed made in God's image and are certainly objects of His regard and kindness, but not all people are called by His name (see John 1:12; Romans 9:8). Those who have been born "from above" by God's Holy Spirit and have become disciples of Jesus Christ are the children of God on this planet. Never mind that this is undiplomatic. It is a fact. And for believers it is the primary fact. We are really, right now, God's very own children. We bear the family resemblance. As we continue in faith (which we shall) we will become more



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and more reminiscent of God Himself. This transformation leads to our loving not only those pleasing to us, but even those who hate us and despise us and mistreat us. It is what children of God do.

Believer, don't let yourself be fooled by the feelings and inclinations of your flesh. Our flesh will continue to carry the muscle-memory of the habits formed in sin: wanting to retaliate when injured, rage at having our will thwarted, indignation at being treated dishonorably. That we continue to feel the pull of those impulses (and at times give way to them) does not change the fact of who we are really. We are children of the Almighty God and are being inwardly renewed to resemble Jesus. A butterfly, I suppose, could still try to slink around and do caterpillar things, but that wouldn't change the fact that she is a butterfly!

Lots of folks pride themselves of being good to those who are good to them. Jesus in effect said, "What's the big deal about that?" His followers are good even to those who hate them. How is this possible? By trying really hard? No, but because of the divine impulse to work in our spirits. Yes, we must assent to life in this direction, which is why the Sermon on the Mount serves as a map to show us which way the current of our life will be flowing. We do give conscious and deliberate agreement to following Jesus as His disciple. We don't drift into discipleship. We choose it. Having chosen it, our path is not one of arduous self-effort, but more one of relenting to the inward pressure on our wills by the nudge of the Holy Spirit. We stand poised in trust to obey. We get there by our practice of spiritual disciplines which open our hearts to God's grace. But in the final analysis, our role is one of letting God have His way in us more so than one of rigorous efforts.

God is kind. We should not imagine that our enemies will somehow seem pleasant to us. God, I suspect, does not "like" the ungrateful and wicked, but He nevertheless is good to them because that of who He is as a being.

God is simply good. We love our enemies because God loves His enemies.

I used to feel vaguely troubled by the fact that I disliked certain people. Now, I don't worry about it too much. Personal preferences and tastes are inevitable but are not the final arbiter. We choose to be kind to people because the impulse of that choice rises from within. So, for the sake of Jesus (overtly) and for the sake of the inward movements of the Spirit (covertly), we practice courtesy and kindness towards all people.

The love of God through us towards others has little to do with their likeableness. It develops instead from the character of the originating power. In that sense, I suppose, it is similar to electricity. The electrical current comes from the power source, through the wires, and gives no thought as to whether it will empower a dining room chandelier or a light bulb in an outhouse. It is simply a uniform, consistent power emanating from its source. God, who "sends rain on the just and the unjust," empowers us to extend kindness to all in a similarly indiscriminant fashion.

How do we get to this point? Well, once again, I wish I could give counsel as an expert witness, but I can't. There are times I am the conduit of divine love towards others—at other times, I shut it down. What I do know is this—I have to WANT to be a conduit of divine love. I am inclined to want this because my Lord has said this is what He wants. I don't "feel" the virtue of doing so, but I believe Him—that the course of action involved in loving my enemies is essential to one who bears God's family resemblance—and so I place myself in a position to "will the good" of others, even enemies. Then, frankly, He must give me the desire to follow through. My own desires are not sufficiently powerful half the time to be nice even to those who are nice to me!

And we should not expect to be thanked. People are disquieted by the notion that they might be treated well only because of the sheer goodness of the other. C. S. Lewis makes this point in his book, THE FOUR LOVES. We who receive kindness want to feel deserving—worthy, somehow. This is exactly why people find it difficult to accept God's love. We believe we must somehow deserve it, or at least pay God back. I am positive though, that if I could say "thank you" to Jesus (to His face) He would say, "Don't mention it. And don't try to pay me back. But if you want fullness of life, come and follow me as my disciple."

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