

“Love your enemies” Matthew chapter 5 verse 43

I imagine that there are few, if any, more controversial or radical teachings of Jesus than this one. It's inherent in human nature that your enemies are the people you least want to wish well. But Jesus doesn't just leave it there. He goes on to say that we should pray for people who persecute us, so that we will reflect the character of our Father in heaven, the God who says that he does not take any pleasure in the death of wicked people, but would rather that they turn to him and lived.

Our world is currently wallowing in a quagmire of hostility, hatred and anger. So many people are demanding that they are right, that their morality ought to be binding on everybody, that their rightness gives them the right to aggressively demand their way, and to silence anyone who disagrees with them. Our world is dividing into hostile factions. That is what happens when you hate your enemies and behave according to human nature.

But Jesus says that his disciples must be different. He points out that if we only love the people who love us, how are we different from anyone else in the world? If we are serious about willing and acting in the best interests of everybody, which is what God commands us to do, then that must also include desiring the best good for those who don't like us, or agree with us, or even oppose us.

But what does that look like in practice? Does it mean just letting others treat us abusively, without responding? No, it doesn't. We must respond, but not with hostility. So Peter tells us that we should not pay back evil for evil, or insult for insult, but give a blessing instead. And Paul also says “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” and “Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.”

There are better ways to deal with hostility, anger and insult than responding with more of the same. If we do that, then all we are doing is feeding more hatred and conflict into the world. But Jesus said that those who make peace will be blessed. Can we think of better ways of responding to those who attack us, ways that do not require us to resort to aggression and hostility in return? It is true that we may need to develop thicker skins, and absorb some attacks without responding in kind before we can start to feed something more healthy into our encounters with those we might consider our enemies. But we can trust God to guide us by his Spirit to ways of dealing with them that are more in keeping with being the children of a God who is slow to anger and abounding in love and compassion towards all he has made.

Prayer.

Father, thank you that your desire is always to redeem rather than judge and condemn, and that you will always seek ways in which to draw to faith and reconciliation those whose hearts are hardened towards you. Please help me to reflect your heart of forbearance, forgiveness and reconciliation in dealing with people who are hostile towards me. In Jesus' name, amen.

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