

## Praying for Your Enemies?

Message #3 in the series "Summer Playlist"  
The Book of Psalms: God's Songs for Life"

Matthew 5:43-48; Psalm 109

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown  
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*<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, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children 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. <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? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:43-48)*

So, I'm kind of embarrassed today. I'm embarrassed because as a pastor – and even more importantly, as a life-long Christian, a life-long follower of Jesus – I have to teach you something today that I myself have not mastered. In fact, I've not even come close to mastering.

And I have to say also that, in spite of the over 2,000 years of "field education" practice – the countless sermons and Bible studies and personal devotions and real-life opportunities . . . there are actually very few Christians who have actually come close to living out this very important teaching of Jesus.

In fact, this teaching is so central to what it means to be a follower of Jesus . . . yet, we consistently fail at it – leading me, in my embarrassment, to admit that we don't really have an **educational problem** on this topic in the Christian Church. . . we have an **implementation problem**. We get the concept intellectually. Whether we agree with it or not, we at least understand the teaching. But emotionally . . . emotionally, volitionally . . . we have a really hard time taking the steps to live it out. In fact, if we're really honest, there are parts of us that even resist doing this particular teaching of Jesus.

What I'm talking about here is when Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us.

It's really hard to imagine praying for our enemies, right? Praying for our *enemies*? Are you serious, Jesus? The reality is – we'd much rather pray *against* them. When

we're offended, we want to offend. When we're hurt, we want to hurt back. When we've been violated, we want to get even.

It's human to want retribution. Why? Because when we're offended – when someone hurts us ---

- We feel out of control
- We feel vulnerable and exposed
- We feel weak -- and embarrassed by that weakness
- We feel humiliated
- We feel angry -- and we want to get even

And we would not be alone. Take King David, for example. Most of us have some knowledge of David. Specifically, of course, most of us have heard about the David and Goliath story – how this young shepherd boy takes on the 9-foot-tall warrior Goliath and knocks him cold with a single stone from his slingshot – and a whole lot of faith in the God of the Impossible.

Now, there's a lot more we could say about David – a lot of stories that give broader depth to his character, both good and bad. But in all of it, the Bible records him as being uniquely special to the heart of God. In fact, it says in **Acts 13:22** that David was a "*man after God's own heart.*"

Yet, in spite of his bravado with Goliath, in spite of his record-making victories as a soldier for the King, David – in all of his humanness – gets scared at times. That's right. We read about those fears – and a whole bunch of other deep human emotions – in the Psalms (or songs) that David wrote.

In fact, the Psalms indicate that David, in his fear and frustration, actually wanted to get even with his enemies – and often used the Psalms to express that desire for retaliation. Look at what he wrote in Psalm 109 ---

*<sup>1</sup> My God, whom I praise,  
do not remain silent,  
<sup>2</sup> for people who are wicked and deceitful  
have opened their mouths against me;  
they have spoken against me with lying tongues.  
<sup>3</sup> With words of hatred they surround me;  
they attack me without cause.  
<sup>4</sup> In return for my friendship they accuse me,  
but I am a man of prayer.  
<sup>5</sup> They repay me evil for good,  
and hatred for my friendship. (Psalm 109:1-5)*

These opening verses set the stage. In prayer, David lays out his confusion: These people whom he had considered friends, were taking advantage of him, lying about him, verbally attacking his character, and unfairly making false accusations about him. Then, starting in verse 6, we read --

*<sup>6</sup> Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy;  
let an accuser stand at his right hand.  
<sup>7</sup> When he is tried, let him be found guilty,  
and may his prayers condemn him. (Psalm 109:6-7)*

So, keep in mind that David is still talking with God in prayer. He's praying against his enemy. He's asking God to have someone do to this enemy what the enemy is doing to David. And then David's defensive prayer goes broader. Starting in verse 8, talking about his enemy, David prays --

*<sup>8</sup> May his days be few;  
may another take his place of leadership. (Psalm 109:8)*

So, this enemy is a person in a position of power. David is asking God to take away his influence. And then David goes more personal ---

*<sup>9</sup> May his children be fatherless  
and his wife a widow.  
<sup>10</sup> May his children be wandering beggars;  
may they be driven from their ruined homes.  
<sup>11</sup> May a creditor seize all he has;  
may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.  
<sup>12</sup> May no one extend kindness to him  
or take pity on his fatherless children.  
<sup>13</sup> May his descendants be cut off,  
their names blotted out from the next generation. (Psalm 109:9-13)*

Here, David brings not only his enemy into the focus of his retribution, but also his enemy's family! Notice something here – a really important discipleship point: **Whenever we allow anger or hatred or the desire for revenge to marinate in us and to fester, that anger, hatred or desire for revenge multiplies exponentially.** It becomes an ever-expanding, ever-generalizing, unquenchable force that floods our souls and prevents us from living the life that God designed us to live. We end up giving even more power to our enemy to control our emotions and our lives.

And, as we see next in David's own words, that expansive force eventually extends beyond the enemy, beyond the enemy's family – all the way to asking God to prevent the enemy – and his ancestors! -- from ever experiencing God's grace, God's forgiveness, or God's salvation. Look at verse 14 –

*<sup>14</sup> May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord;  
may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.  
<sup>15</sup> May their sins always remain before the Lord,  
that he may blot out their name from the earth. (Psalm 109:14-15)*

David says, in effect, "God, just wipe away any memory of this guy's existence for all eternity." In these words of Psalm 109, David actually reveals what we all go

through at times – at least in our minds – as we cope with the pains of having been victimized by our enemies. And then, like us, David goes on to justify why God should answer his prayer against his enemy. Look at verses 16-20 ---

*16 For he never thought of doing a kindness,  
but hounded to death the poor  
and the needy and the brokenhearted.  
17 He loved to pronounce a curse—  
may it come back on him.  
He found no pleasure in blessing—  
may it be far from him.  
18 He wore cursing as his garment;  
it entered into his body like water,  
into his bones like oil.  
19 May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,  
like a belt tied forever around him.  
20 May this be the Lord's payment to my accusers,  
to those who speak evil of me. (Psalm 109:16-20)*

Pretty strong words, right? Justifying is what we do. You see, it gives voice to our pain. Underneath our justifying is a heart that is scared, a heart that is vulnerable, a heart that feels like it can't control what our enemies think about us or do to us . . . so we lash out. And **we triangle God into our pain . . . asking God to agree with us as we position ourselves against our enemy.** Yet, when we're genuinely honest with God about how scared and vulnerable we are, that's when our true prayer begins to emerge. Notice how David does that with God:

*21 But you, Sovereign Lord,  
help me for your name's sake;  
out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.  
22 For I am poor and needy,  
and my heart is wounded within me.  
23 I fade away like an evening shadow;  
I am shaken off like a locust.  
24 My knees give way from fasting;  
my body is thin and gaunt.  
25 I am an object of scorn to my accusers;  
when they see me, they shake their heads.  
26 Help me, Lord my God;  
save me according to your unfailing love.  
27 Let them know that it is your hand,  
that you, Lord, have done it.  
28 While they curse, may you bless;  
may those who attack me be put to shame,  
but may your servant rejoice.  
29 May my accusers be clothed with disgrace  
and wrapped in shame as in a cloak. (Psalm 109:21-29)*

Do you hear the raw honesty of this prayer? Even in the midst of David's prayer against his enemy, he reveals a heart that's reaching out to God – for God to make sense of David's pain, and, more importantly, to deliver him from that pain.

Then David closes his prayer – starting in verse 30 . . .

*<sup>30</sup> With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord;  
in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him.  
<sup>31</sup> For he stands at the right hand of the needy,  
to save their lives from those who would condemn them. (Psalm 109:30-31)*

What David does in these closing verses, is he reminds God of God's character, of how God takes care of those who are falsely accused.

There are quite a few Psalms that illustrate how David or others pray against their enemies. When you have time, take a look at **Psalm 137** to see what the writer asks God to do to the Babylonians who dared to exile the people of Israel from their beloved homeland. Or **Psalm 55** – and how that writer views what God should do to his enemies.

The power of the Book of Psalms is that all of our human emotions and experiences – ALL of them – are right there, encapsulated within the words of songs . . . songs that formed the liturgy of the Hebrew people, as well as the people of the early Christian church. They're honest. They're reflective. And they're very, very real.

But then . . . Jesus comes on the scene – and He teaches a different way to deal with our enemies. In Matthew 5:43-48, we read –

*<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 . . ."* (**Matthew 5:43-48**)

"*You have heard that it was said . . . But I tell you . . .*" That's a formula that Jesus used in His teaching. "You have heard that it was said . . ." Certainly, the Jewish people had the Law of Moses. It taught them a lot about loving their neighbor. But they also had the Psalms – the words of King David and others who wrote prayers against their enemies. And those prayers resonated with the people. They had "heard it said." They had heard it prayed. And filtered through those emotional prayers, what they heard was that they were to hate their enemy.

But Jesus taught a different way. "*But I tell you,*" Jesus said, "*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" Jesus was flipping the script.

To understand why Jesus was going against the grain in His teaching, we have to realize that Jesus had a different mission. His mission was to move people toward the life that God intends—a life of freedom, hope, forgiveness, love, and grace and release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the proclamation of the Lord's favor (**Luke 4:18-19**).

Within what, in Matthew's Gospel, is known as the Sermon on the Mount, the words of this passage must be viewed within the larger context of the rest of the Gospels' witness. **Jesus would go on to teach that our focus should never be on our own experiences of offense, but rather on how we may bear witness to what God is doing in the world.** "Seek *first* the Kingdom of God and His righteousness," Jesus says in **Matthew 6:33**. Everything else will make sense when we put God's plans *first* – when we love first, when we forgive first, when we put others' needs ahead of our own first. In other words, how we respond to our enemies must not be like how everybody else responds. **Our response to those who offend us needs to show whose followers we are.**

Jesus says, <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 <sup>45</sup> **that you may be children of your Father in heaven.**" (**Matthew 6:43-45**)

And it's not just about our identity as children of God. It's about our witness to the world. The world needs to see that we are different. And we are different because of who God is, and what God has done for us and in us. About God, it says starting in verse 45 --

*"He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <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? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 6:45-48)*

Jesus says that we are NOT to pursue revenge, NOT to allow anger to define our relationships with one another. Instead, we are to pray for our enemies . . . to love them . . . to show mercy and grace especially when they don't deserve it. So, how do we bridge between Jesus telling us to pray for our enemies... and the Psalms (David) praying against them? There are a few pointers that the Psalms – and Jesus – teach us that may help.

1. **Crying to God does not mean that we need to hate our enemy.** Cries for justice help us verbalize our pain. As we learned last week in the Psalms of Lament, it's important for us to give voice to our experiences and direct them to God.
2. **Injustice does not require revenge.** God reminds us that He will be the champion of the weak (e.g., **Psalm 9**). God says, "*Vengeance is mine, I will repay*" (**Romans 12:19**).
3. **Our response to our enemy always says more about us than our enemies.** Hatred always breeds more hatred – and that hatred changes us, not them.
4. **It is hard to hate someone that you're praying for...** especially when you're praying for them genuinely.
5. **There is no greater weapon against our enemies than the prayer that asks God to change their hearts into followers of Jesus.**

So, yes... I'm embarrassed that I have not mastered this teaching. WE have not mastered this teaching.

And why is it so important that we do – or at least that we engage this teaching on a personal level? Because the teaching is about us. **God is asking us to apply to our enemies the same grace that God has applied to us.** The apostle Paul reminds us in **Romans 5:8** that "*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*"

Again, in **Romans 5:10**, Paul writes – "*For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*"

Whether on a mountainside or in a field or on the Cross, Jesus is teaching us, His followers, **empathy**. . . the kind of empathy God has for all of us.

Jesus calls us to counter hatred with love. Yes, it's hard. Yes, it's what it means to be followers of Jesus. Yes, we will fail at times. And when we do, we need to confess our own hatred before we condemn our enemies' hatred. We need to confess our desires for revenge and ask God to be our champion. We need to ask God to replace hatred with love — the hatred that is both in us as well as in our enemies.

Let's remember . . . God is fighting a battle that often we do not see. And He's beginning that fight within us – with our own resistance. So, here's some homework for us. I'm going to give you a prayer to help you in praying for your enemy.

**God, I'm praying right now for \_\_\_\_\_.**

***(fill in with the name of the person)***

**You know what they did to me. It's real. It's painful.**

**But, God, today . . . would you love them?**

**Would you show them today just how much you love them?**

**Even if they don't change how they feel about me,**

**would You help them to change how they feel about You?**

**Thank You, Jesus, for dying for them too. Amen.**

The Psalms teach us that God sees in all of us the stories that no one else may know. Maybe – just maybe – by praying for our enemies, we may begin to see what God sees too.

Let's pray our prayer together . . .

*Lord, what do You need me to see, what do You need me to hear, what do You need me to know, and what do You need me to do? I am Your servant, in Jesus's name. Amen.*