

Loving Our Enemies?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 31:31-34, Matt. 5:44, 6:12, Luke 6:27-36, 23:1-34.*

Memory Text: “**If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone**” (*Romans 12:18, NIV*).

Some people have or claim to have only friends and no enemies; some have no friends but only enemies. Most of us are somewhere in the middle: We have friends, but we also do not get along with everybody. This may seem a simple fact of life, but, as Christians, we cannot simply shrug our shoulders if our relationship with some others is disrupted or if we harbor feelings of distrust, even antipathy, toward some people. Nor should it leave us indifferent if some people have problems with us. The Christian message of love has relevance for our relationship with those whom we dislike or, even worse, might even feel hateful toward.

We are admonished to “turn from evil and do good” and to “seek peace and pursue it” in every way we can (*Ps. 34:14, NIV*). Though it is important not to forget the larger picture, this week we’ll focus on ourselves and the way we relate to those with whom we have (shall we put it kindly?) unresolved issues.

The Week at a Glance: **What does Christ’s example on the cross tell us about loving our enemies? How can we love our enemies? Why should we do so? Why must we forgive before we can love?**

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 4.*

Jesus and His Enemies

“Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (*Luke 23:34*).

Read Luke 23:1-34, reviewing the events that lead to Christ uttering these incredible words. In light of all that was happening to Jesus, how He was being treated, how He was being spoken to, how He was being mocked, how He was being lied about, what powerful lesson can we learn from this example regarding how we treat our enemies?

Unrewarded, unaccepted, reviled, mocked, tortured, Jesus has every reason to hate those who treated Him as they did. And yet, amid His own sufferings, amid His own abasement, Jesus—forgetting self—prays for those who would, by most standards, be deemed His enemies. What an amazing testimony to God’s love! What a powerful rebuke to our own pride, envy, and hateful attitudes toward others!

Some of history’s cruelest and meanest characters have been able to manifest kindness and love to those who were kind and loving to them. Indeed, almost anyone can do that. But we see Jesus here living out a principle that reflects something greater: unconditional love, even to those who hate Him back. It’s hard to imagine a more powerful witness to the world of the character of our God and His power to work in our lives.

This attitude, in a sense, reveals the essence of the Cross. “For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life” (*Rom. 5:10*). In other words, despite our attitude toward God, He poured Himself out for us through the life and suffering of Jesus. And He did this even while we were sinners, even while we were alienated and estranged from Him.

With such an example before us, how could we do anything other than, through God’s grace, seek to manifest that same principle ourselves?

Go back over Luke 23:1-34. In what similar ways have you been treated unfairly? How did you respond? What does your response, in contrast to Christ’s, tell you about your own personal need to grow in grace?

Key Text: *Romans 12:18.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To exhort us as Christians to love our enemies.
2. To understand how to follow Jesus' example of forgiveness.

Lesson Outline:

I. Love My Enemy!

- A. Jesus is our example of how to love our enemies.
- B. Jesus had every reason to hate those who mistreated Him, but He didn't.
- C. It is easy to love the lovable who return our love. On the other hand, it is more difficult to love the unlovable, especially when they return love with hate, indifference, or cruelty.

II. Faith, Grace, and Forgiveness.

- A. Only by surrendering self to the Lord will we be able, by God's grace, to love, pray for, and do good unto our enemies.
- B. The heart of the sinner cannot, of itself, love its enemy.
- C. Loving an enemy requires forgiveness.
- D. To refuse to forgive suggests that one has never been forgiven.

III. Why You Should Love Your Enemy.

- A. God requires His followers to love one another, including one's enemies.
- B. To love and to forgive our enemies is good medicine for the soul.
- C. Loving our enemies presents a powerful and attractive witness to the world.

Summary: Proverbs 17:22 says, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones." Love and forgiveness together play an integral part in cultivating a merry heart. God knows that our happiness depends upon our obedience to His commands. That is why loving and forgiving our enemies are cornerstones of His commandments.

COMMENTARY

I. Loving Your Enemies.

Why is religion—which is nothing if not an attempt to reach a higher standard that usually includes peace and forgiveness—often such a source of conflict? If we are truly living a Christian life, why should we have enemies at all? What does our choice of enemies—or our enemies' choice of us—say about ourselves?

As Christians, we are going to make some enemies among people who simply resent us for our Christianity. Paul warned us that all who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (*2 Tim. 3:12*). But most often, we probably are at least fifty percent responsible for most of our mutually hostile relationships. Ego and self-will on the

Loving Our Enemies (*Matt. 5:44, Luke 6:27-36*).

Ghandi (1869–1948) once said, “It is easy enough to be friendly to one’s friends. But to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy is the quintessence of true religion.”—*Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1965), vol. 2, sect. 248. These words sound like an echo from the One who practiced, even more perfectly than Ghandi, what He preached.

What basic principle was given by Christ, which must govern our relationship with those who have turned against us? *Matt. 5:44, Luke 6:27-36*.

Having grown up in Galilee, an area renowned for its political unrest, and living in a land under occupation by a ruthless foreign power, Christ knew about civil unrest, war, tyranny, and enemies. When He began His work and challenged the beliefs and practices of the religious elite of His days, He inevitably made many bitter enemies. But He did, indeed, love His enemies, even when He was brutally arrested, flogged, and nailed to a cross (*Luke 23:34*).

Review the following texts, which spell out in more detail what loving our enemies implies: *Proverbs 24:17, 25:21, Matthew 5:38-42, Ephesians 4:26*.

“We are to love our enemies with the same love that Christ manifested toward His enemies by giving His life to save them. Many may say, ‘This is a hard commandment; for I want to keep just as far as I can from my enemies.’ But acting in accordance with your own inclination would not be carrying out the principles that our Saviour has given. ‘Do good,’ He says, ‘to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. . . .’ This scripture illustrates one phase of Christian perfection. While we were yet enemies of God, Christ gave His life for us. We are to follow His example.”—Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, pp. 253, 254.

We clearly have been told by inspiration to love our enemies. Now, if someone were to ask you, “How do you love your enemies?” what would you respond?

part of all interested parties can usually be seen to be at the root of conflicts. This is especially true of conflicts within the church or other religious conflicts, which are usually about “my religion” or “my theology,” rather than just about religion or theology.

In any such situation, it is up to at least one of the combatants—assuming one or both claim to be followers of Christ—to neutralize the other’s hostility with love, or at least nonhostility. It is easy enough to see what others are doing wrong and to blame our negative relationships on baseless persecution on the part of others. But Christ calls us to see through our own ego games and see that we are—at least part of the time—the problem. Ironically, our enemies may be the very ones who can help us in this, yet another reason to love your enemies.

II. Useful Quotes on Loving Your Enemies.

“The word translated *love* [in Matt. 5:44] originally meant ‘to welcome, entertain, be well pleased, contented.’ . . . In the N.T., however, it denotes the love of God for man and of man for God (I John 3-5) and the benevolent lovingkindness which seeks the material and spiritual good of others (I Cor. 13). When Jesus commands love of enemies, he thinks primarily of personal relationships and perhaps also of the relationships of small groups. Such love is the supreme test of the religious man’s character.”—*The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1951), vol. 7, p. 303.

“But love, in the Christian sense, does not mean an emotion. It is a state not of the feelings but of the will; that state of the will which we have naturally about ourselves, and must learn to have about other people.

“I pointed out in the chapter on Forgiveness that our love for ourselves does not mean that we like ourselves. It means that we wish our own good. In the same way Christian Love (or Charity) for our neighbours is quite a different thing from liking or affection. We ‘like’ or are ‘fond of’ some people, and not of others. It is important to understand that this natural ‘liking’ is neither a sin nor a virtue, any more than your likes and dislikes in food are a sin or a virtue. It is just a fact. But, of course, what we do about it is either sinful or virtuous.”—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 113.

“Christ is not dealing with abstractions here. Being like the Father means loving one’s enemies, just as God loves His enemies. After all, doesn’t He provide sunshine and rain for evil people, just as He does for the good? Anybody, even a tax collector, can love his or her friends. God demands supernatural love for all people. Just as the Father so loved the world that He gave His Son to die for people who were ungodly and His enemies . . . so are Christians to love even those who spitefully use them. This is the ultimate in God-likeness.”—George R. Knight, *Matthew: The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press®, 1994), p. 95.

Increase Our Faith

For the past two days, we've looked at one of the loftiest principles in Scripture: love, not for those who love us back but for our enemies. We have not only Christ's words to that effect but His example, too, manifested most clearly at the Cross, unquestionably the greatest revelation of that principle ever revealed in the universe.

It's one thing to be told what to do, to know what to do, or even to want to do it; it's another, however, to do it. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else in our lives, we need power from above.

Read Matthew 18:21, 22 and Luke 17:3-5. What question do the disciples ask Jesus? How does He answer? How do they respond to His answer?

“Lord, increase our faith.” Who of us couldn't relate to their request? Jesus here points them to a standard they are not used to, a standard that goes beyond what even many of the most forgiving people would aspire to—which is why their response is so sensible. They want to do this but realize they need something more than what they have in themselves at the moment to be able to do it. Thus, their appeal to Jesus for help.

Of course, faith is a gift (*Eph. 2:8*), but there's so much we can do to receive the gift, to multiply the gift, to strengthen the gift. Here's where a life of prayer, of devotion, and of meditation upon Christ all play a crucial role. Only as we surrender ourselves to the Lord, only as we reckon ourselves dead to self and sin (*Rom. 6:10, 11*), only as we allow the Lord to work in us (*vs. 4*), will we by God's grace be able to love our enemies, to pray for them, and to do good to them. Left to their own, our sinful, vengeful hearts will never allow us to love our enemies. That's why we need to surrender constantly to the Lord, and we can do that only by a conscious choice on our part to make such a surrender.

Who are your enemies? What makes them your enemies? If you're not loving them, what's the first step you could take in at least trying to?

III. The Bible on Loving Your Enemies.

“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” (*Matt. 5:43-45, NIV*).

“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” (*Rom. 12:17, 18, NIV*).

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Matthew 18:15-17; Luke 6:27, 28; 23:34; 2 Timothy 3:12; Hebrews 12:14; 1 John 4:15-17.*

- 1 When a Christian has enemies, is it because he or she is doing something right, something wrong, or both? Under what circumstances might Christians be hated for no reason?
- 2 How did Jesus react to His enemies? Did He ever reciprocate the hateful treatment He received? If so, why? Are we ever to lash out at our own enemies?
- 3 Jesus was treated unfairly many times in His life, yet He never insisted on His own rights. How can this be a model for us in our rights-saturated society? What circumstances might warrant standing up for our rights? Discuss a Christian way of doing so.
- 4 Loving our enemies is, to all appearances, an impossible demand. Many unbelievers have cited it as an example of the impossibility of living a Christian life. How can loving our enemies become a living reality in our lives? What stands in our way of Jesus' command to do so?
- 5 The Romans oppressed the Jews and so generally, the Jews hated the Romans. But Jesus teaches we should love our enemies. This does not necessarily mean we have affection for those who commit evil against us. It is instead referring to an act of the will in which we wish our enemies no harm and even act in their best interests. Discuss what it means to act in our enemies' best interests. (Think about how Jesus acted in the best interests of His enemies.)
- 6 Many people believe it is impossible to forgive someone unless they have asked for our forgiveness. What does Jesus' example teach us about this?

The Grace of Forgiving (*Jer. 31:31-34, Matt. 6:12*).

Before we can love our enemies, we must forgive them; and before we can forgive, we must first learn to accept forgiveness. This is where the Christian life begins: the certainty of having been accepted by God and the assurance of forgiveness through faith in our risen Lord.

How does the Lord's Prayer remind us that we must, in turn, be willing to forgive those who have sinned against us? *Jer. 31:31-34, Matt. 6:12, Heb. 8:12.*

"If we really know Christ as our Savior our hearts are broken and cannot be hard, and we cannot refuse forgiveness. If you are refusing forgiveness to anybody I suggest that you have never been forgiven. . . . Pray to God and say, 'Forgive me O God as I forgive others because of what Thou hast done for me. All I ask is that Thou shouldst forgive me in the same manner; not to the same degree, because all I do is imperfect. In the same way, as it were, as Thou hast forgiven me, I am forgiving others. Forgive me as I forgive them because of what the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ has done in my heart.'"—D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1960), vol. 2, pp. 75, 76.

The author presents a crucial point. To truly forgive, we must understand how much we have been forgiven. Whatever others have done to us, is it worse than what our sins have done to the Lord? Hardly. The distance we have to cross in order to forgive others is almost nonexistent in contrast to the distance Christ, the eternal God, crossed in order to forgive us. This is a reality we must constantly keep before us if we are to forgive and then to love.

How does the Cross help us understand what our forgiveness cost God? *Isa. 53:4-6, Phil. 2:5-8.*

By dwelling on the Cross, by dwelling on the cost of our forgiveness, we can, through God's grace, come to the point where we can learn to forgive others, even those whom we might deem, and rightly so, our enemies.

Are you having trouble forgiving, much less loving, an enemy? Write down your understanding of what Christ suffered at the Cross in order to forgive you. Pray and meditate over just what He did in your behalf. See if it will not help open you up toward those who have earned your anger.

Witnessing

“For if a man find his enemy will he let him go . . . away?” These were the words that Saul spoke after David spared his life (*1 Sam. 24:19*). King Saul was David’s enemy. In a jealous rage, Saul desired to kill David. But on one occasion as David and his men hid in a cave from the hostile king, David had the opportunity to kill Saul.

Saul unsuspectingly entered the cave where David and his men were hiding. David’s men encouraged him to avenge himself, but David was moved with compassion and could not bring himself to kill the king, the Lord’s anointed.

Even as Christians there are people with whom we are not able to get along, whether by their choice or ours. Whether we call them enemies or not, they certainly are not our friends. Discuss Romans 12:9-21 in light of the questions: How do we get along with people who do not wish to get along with us? How can we witness to those who want to be our enemies? How did Jesus exemplify the counsel in these verses, and how can we follow His example in today’s world?

The majority of the world lives by the rule, “Do unto others before they do unto you.” As Christians, we recognize this as a greatly fractured version of Matthew 7:12—the golden rule. As the “true standard of Christianity” (Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 136, 137), how does this rule help us to understand what it means to love our enemies?

Why Should We Love Our Enemies?

“A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (*Prov. 15:1*).

Why should we love our enemies?

If you answered the above question, *Because God tells us to*, you have given probably the best answer a Christian can give. We should love our enemies, because our God has told us to, and if we are Christians, we obey the Lord.

But the Lord doesn't ask us to do things in a vacuum; there's usually a practical reason for what He asks, because He loves us and wants what's for our good. (*See Deut. 10:13.*) Thus, there's an incredible amount of practical, personal good that can come not just to our enemies but to ourselves by learning to love those whom we deem enemies. Think of how much different our world would be if we learned to love our enemies. It would be the closest thing to heaven we're ever going to find on this earth, at least for now.

Read Romans 12:20, 21 and 1 Thessalonians 5:15. What is Paul saying there? How do his words fit in with the overall theme of this week's lesson?

God has done so much for us. As Christians, we have so much reason to have hope, because we have the promise not only of all things working for good now but the promise of eternity in a whole new existence; one filled with love, peace, and prosperity, an existence we can't even begin to comprehend now. Thus, with such a promise before us, we, of all people, should be able to rise above the common hatreds that have poisoned this planet until it's a cauldron of hate, violence, and revenge. What better way to be salt, to be light, than to love our enemies, thus bearing a powerful witness to the world that we have something it desperately needs, and that, of course, is Jesus.

In your own situation, wherever you live, what changes would come about if all the Christians you knew, yourself included, started to love their enemies? Write out a paragraph imagining the changes.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Discuss the following quote in light of today’s study: “Acceptance does not preclude [prevent] change, it precludes remaining in conflict.”—Hugh and Gayle Prather, quoted by Tanya Whewey, in *The Sanctuary for the Spirit* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), p. x.

Thought Questions:

- ① Dwight Nelson wrote, “I remember my friend Frank Jackson, who whispered to me before he died, ‘Dwight, what we need most of all is the simple message of Jesus.’” The old adage is still true. “It isn’t what you know that matters in the end but Who you know.”—Holy Bible, *A Guide For the Next Millenium* (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996), pp. 3, 4. How does your opening the door for people to know Jesus as Friend and Healer and to know you as a brother or sister in Him help you to be friends rather than enemies?
- ② What light does Romans 7:18; 8:13, 26-28; and Isaiah 42:6 shed on the Christian struggle to forgive enemies?
- ③ When might there be a time when a Christian should not reach out to an enemy? What is your Bible basis for your response?
- ④ In light of the topic of forgiving our enemies, how are James 4:4; Matthew 5:44; and 28:10, 19 in harmony?
- ⑤ Why does God’s forgiveness not put us on spiritual *Easy Street*? Are temptations and trials easier or more difficult because of God’s forgiveness? Is forgiveness the beginning or the end of the struggles in life? Explain your answers.

Application Question:

Khalil Gibran wrote, “If you would know God, be not therefore a solver of riddles. Rather look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children.”—*The Sanctuary of the Spirit*, p. 54. Can you see God playing with the children of your enemies? Can you see Him playing with His children who are your enemies? How can this family image help you to grasp the relationship He would have you develop with your enemies?

Further Study: Read “The Measure of Forgiveness” in Ellen G. White’s book *Christ’s Object Lessons* (pp. 243–251). Note in particular the following statement:

“Our Lord teaches that matters of difficulty between Christians are to be settled within the church. They should not be opened before those who do not fear God. If a Christian is wronged by his brother, let him not appeal to unbelievers in a court of justice. Let him follow out the instruction Christ has given. Instead of trying to avenge himself, let him seek to save his brother. God will guard the interests of those who love and fear Him, and with confidence we may commit our case to Him who judges righteously.”—pages 248, 249.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Dwell more on this idea of the practical good that can come from loving our enemies. Discuss what this world would be like if this principle were to take hold of the world as quickly and as firmly as does the desire for revenge.
- 2** Should the idea that in the end God will bring justice and punishment to evildoers play a role in helping us learn to love our enemies? Is it really love if we want God ultimately to punish them? How does Christ’s prayer on the cross help answer that question?
- 3** Relatives of a murder or rape victim often say they will never be able to forgive the person who committed that heinous crime. How can one help someone in dealing with this very human and understandable reaction?

Summary: Many of us have enemies or are regarded by others as their enemies. It is important to analyze our relationships and ask ourselves why some relationships have broken down and what can be done to restore them. As Christians, we are challenged to build positive relationships, even with those we do not really like. Loving our enemies does not come naturally. Yet, if we realize how God always stands ready to forgive us, we should be prepared also to forgive “our debtors.”