

HOW SHOULD WE REACT TOWARD THOSE WHO HATE, CURSE AND MISTREAT US?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

I recently had a conversation with a woman who works on the administrative staff of a Christian college that was established years ago on the edge of a certain town. The town has now grown to the point that the college is surrounded by urban sprawl. Angry neighbors are demanding that the college either reduce the number of students or sell out and relocate. She told me she was emotionally shook up by the hate mail they are receiving and the angry attitudes of their neighbors at the city council meetings. What should they do in this difficult time in the college's history was her question to me.

This kind of thing happens not only to Christian colleges but to churches as well. When our church was built it was surrounded by orchards. Traveling the few blocks to the main thoroughfare, El Camino Real, was a big trip in those days. Times have changed, however. Today, our neighbors wish they did not have to deal with the large numbers of people and the traffic around here during the week. Emotions run high because by nature we all want to claim our rights.

The question the college administrator was asking is, "How should we react towards those who hate us, curse and mistreat us?" I turned to Luke 6:27-38 and shared with her that in spite of the community and political pressure, she needed to ask the Lord to lead her to some individuals whom he could empower her to love. There is a much higher calling than merely protecting our property or our rights. The issue is eternal life.

We also need to ask ourselves in the midst of a fallen and evil world system how our Lord would want us to love our enemies. And our Lord would instruct us to,

I. Treat others the way you want to be treated, Luke 6: 27-31

But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. And just as you want people to treat you, treat them in the same way.

We have already learned that our Lord had chosen the 12 apostles on the instruction of his Father. Jesus will now begin to prepare them to work in the ministry with him, giving them power and authority to heal the sick and cast out demons. Even as our Lord sat down to teach, the shadow of the cross was falling over his ministry. He knew from the Messianic prophecies that he would experience many of the spiritual truths he was about to teach his followers. Soon he would have to go up to the City of Peace and there suffer under the hands of the Jewish religious leaders who were under control of the prince of the kingdom of darkness.

Luke 6 records that our Lord came down from the hills of Mount Hermon after praying all night to his Father, and chose his 12 apostles from among many faithful disciples. He then proceeded to heal all who came to him. As the crowds gathered around him Jesus turned to his apostles and disciples and delivered the address we now refer to as "The Sermon on the Mount," or the "Secrets of How to Live in the Kingdom of God." Luke 6:20-26 records our Lord's blessings on those who were willing to declare themselves spiritually bankrupt, and those who were spiritually hungry, weeping and persecuted for the sake of the Son of Man. He also pronounced the woes that would come upon those who were rich, well fed, laughing at life, and living as

men-pleasers, refusing to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah.

Today's passage, Luke 6:27-31, continues the Lord's explanation of the secrets of the kingdom. Notice that Jesus' sermon expands the theme that runs throughout the gospel of Luke: "I have not come to call righteous men, but sinners to repentance." When Jesus says that we must love our enemies, it is not so that people feel good about each other and have a happy life on earth. His purpose is to bring the world of sinners into life as found in him as the Son of God (Luke 5:32)--eternal life now as well as after our physical death.

Our Lord uses this opportunity to challenge the misinterpretation of the law as it was taught by the Pharisees and scribes. In Matthew 6:44, he said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor' [found in Leviticus 19:18] and hate your enemies" [which had no biblical reference]. According to Leviticus 19:18, the Jews knew that they were not to hate their Jewish brothers: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." On the other hand, the Pharisees knew Psalms 5:5-6: "For Thou are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; no evil dwells with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all who do iniquity, you destroy those who speak falsehood; the Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit." They used these verses and others like them to argue that they could join God in his hatred of sinners in their country and in the surrounding Gentile nations. Certain passages from the Dead Sea Scrolls used by the Essenes during Christ's time, state that the Jews should love the "sons of light and hate the sons of darkness." In this context, hatred is synonymous with the crime of murder, as the Lord points out later in his address.

During the days of Christ the Jews were surrounded by enemies. The Greeks, barbarians and the Romans made life miserable for them. The Jews had a deep-seated hatred for the Romans. From the high priest down to the poorest beggar the Jews abhorred them. The Romans in turn treated the Jews with contempt, and sentenced them to unjust beatings and instant imprisonments on the most trivial charges. This hatred gave fuel to the Jewish Zealots who sought every opportunity to terrorize the Romans. Further, the self-righteous Jews hated those whom they regarded as unrighteous Jews within their own nation--those who broke the law by not attending the temple feasts and the synagogue service of instruction, etc. Finally, they loathed tax collectors, harlots, wine-bibbers and swine herdsman. They regarded them as the lowest members of society.

Who were the enemies of Jesus and his followers? Ever since he intentionally broke the Sabbath traditions and proclaimed himself to be the Son of Man, the Jewish religious leadership under the authority of the high priest sought to kill him. They waited for the opportunity to charge him publicly with law-breaking so as to destroy him before his ministry spread and achieved more power than their authority. Therefore, when our Lord taught his disciples to love their enemies he was acknowledging that he and all who loved him were surrounded by real enemies. Certain people were threatened by his person and message, and they could cause great harm to the disciples.

The Lord Jesus took on the problem of how to relate to an enemy by saying the disciples should extend agape love, self-sacrificial love or love in action, towards all those who hated them. He taught them to act towards their enemies with the same agape love the Father demonstrated to us in his Son. The apostle Paul said of the whole human race ". . . if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10).

This kind of love can only be demonstrated when we declare our spiritual bankruptcy and trust our Lord to love our enemies through us. The way to love an enemy is not to rely on ourselves, but acknowledge that we cannot do so; then we should ask God to love them through us by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Agape love can only be produced by God as he expresses it in our hearts. It is not a matter of feeling, but a matter of the will. This kind of love is based more on action than words. The Lord demonstrated this when he visited Jerusalem just before he was crucified. He cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13: 34).

Today, the genuine Christian is surrounded by a host of invisible evil powers which influence our visible enemies, political, philosophical and social, who hate the Christian community. The most dangerous enemies, however, are those found on the religious level--those who reject Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, calling him

instead a good man, a prophet, a teacher, a son of God rather than the Son of God. Our enemies are the New Age philosophers and gurus who mock and ignore Jesus as the Lord of Lords, King of Kings and Savior of the world. The enemies of Christ surround us; and because they are his enemies they are our enemies as well.

Our Lord laid out a foundational principle when he said that we are to love our enemies. He subsequently presented his apostles with six spiritual principles to apply to the personal conflicts they would confront daily. These were to demonstrate that it was possible to express love in a corrupt society, but only through the power of the Holy Spirit. Notice that our Lord did not lay out principles of passive resistance, but rather principles of aggressive love. The apostle Paul summarized the spiritual principles of aggressive love in Romans 12:17-21: "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. . . . If possible so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord' (Deut. 32:35). But if your enemy is hungry, [aggressive love] feed him, and if he is thirsty, [aggressive love] give him a drink (Prov. 25: 21f). Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil [aggressive love] with good."

The Lord deals with his disciples' hearts in the spiritual realm, cutting across human knowledge on how to live in a community on the physical and emotional levels. He sought to begin anew by working in their hearts which he had invaded to become King. As such, he promised to supply them with the resources to enable them to move into the community so they in turn could invade it with love.

The first thing Jesus says is to do good to those who hate you, those who would like to murder you. The language here means to continue to do good to have a lifestyle of goodness. At that moment, Jesus knew the Pharisees and scribes hated him enough to plot his murder. Later he would warn his disciples, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own, but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). We must remember that our enemies hated Christ before they hated us, yet we must not respond by seeking personal revenge.

Our Lord would later illustrate for his disciples how to do good to those who hated them. On the night he was betrayed, Judas brought the soldiers of the high priest to the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, "And they laid hands on him and seized him. But a certain one of those who stood by drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. But Jesus answered and said 'Stop! No more of this.' . . . And he touched his ear and healed him" (Mark 14: 46-47; Luke 22:51). What a wonderful example of doing good to those who hate you!

Secondly, Jesus says to "bless [continue to bless] those who curse you." When men pronounce evil against you, return their curse with a blessing in either word or deed. That is certainly a hard thing to do--especially on the busy freeway! I am amazed at how easily men curse you, whether you're a Christian or not. How do you return evil for good? How about allowing that other driver to merge into your lane even though there is personal cost in terms of your own schedule? It might be a way to bring a little light into his world during a stressful time in his day.

Third, Jesus says to "pray [continue to pray] for those who mistreat you" (Matt. 5:45). After our Lord had been whipped, mocked, scourged and crowned with thorns he demonstrated this at the cross when he prayed for the crowd who mocked him: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Jesus was the only innocent in all creation. He did not deserve the treatment he was receiving, yet he continued to pray for those who persecuted him.

Stephen, the first martyr, followed his example. After giving testimony before the Sanhedrin that Jesus was the Messiah, Stephen was sentenced to be stoned to death. As the stones rained on his body, he looked up to heaven and prayed, "'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!'" (Acts 7: 60). Jesus was willing to die so that others might live, and Stephen followed his glorious example.

Fourth, Jesus says, "Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also." In the first century, the Jews did not have the civil rights we enjoy today. What the Lord is referring to in this instance is not a slap in the

face, unloving insults from evildoers that could create a spirit of revenge in the believer's heart. The things that Jesus already asked of us do not affect our person, but now the enemy is hitting us right where it hurts. A natural desire for vengeance surfaces when we are made to feel embarrassed before those from whom we seek respect. According to Jesus, we should respond to this kind of an insult by relying on the Holy Spirit to give us the courage to turn the other cheek and respond with words or acts of love. He wants us to know that there is something more valuable than our pride at stake at that moment: the eternal life of the one who just hit you is in the balance. It is obvious that your enemy cannot hear about Jesus if you respond by pummeling him into the ground!

At his trial, our Lord himself was struck on the cheek by the high priest's guard, but rather than turn and offer his other cheek he asked, "If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness of the wrong; but if rightly why do you strike me?" Later Pilate had Jesus scourged, and Peter reminds us how our Lord responded: ". . . Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth (Isaiah 53:9), and while being reviled he did not revile in return; while suffering, he uttered no threats, but kept entrusting himself to him who judges righteously" (I Peter 2:21-23).

Jesus continues, "Whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either (Luke 6:29) in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt 5:45). The tunic was a long, sack-like garment made of cotton. Even the poorest man would have a change of tunic. The cloak was a great, blanket-like outer garment which a man wore as a robe by day and used as a blanket at night; without it he would freeze to death. But the Jew only had one cloak, and this could not be taken away from him. Exodus 22:26-27 says: "If you ever take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets, for that is his only covering, it is his cloak for his body. What else shall he sleep in?" Jesus says, however, that if a man wants your coat and you see that he is hurting, give him your shirt also. Do not in any way assert your rights by refusing when someone comes to take your protective covering. Rather, wait on the Lord in prayer before responding.

Jesus says to give to everyone who asks of you, but I am tempted to respond, "We'll get cleaned out lock, stock, and barrel!" The law states, "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God has given you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks" (Deut. 15:7-8). Proverbs says, "He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his good deed" (19:17). These scriptures point out that every time you are helpful to the poor you are loaning to the Lord, and the Lord is always obligated to pay back. He says, "You give that person the resources he needs, and I will take care of your needs."

Next, Jesus declares, "And whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back." He is referring to a thief who forcefully and unjustly takes something that is rightfully yours and then denies that he ever took it. What should we do? The key to the passage is to look for ways to love people who do not have the Lord in their hearts. If a thief should come and steal something from you, do not go after him to seek revenge. Rather, it is proper and right to go through the legal system. Report the robbery, and if he is apprehended, use the opportunity to meet him in jail and tell him about Jesus.

Once again, the issue is not our property or our rights, but rather the enemy's eternal life. After all, the apostle Paul tells us that the kingdom of God is made up of such people: "Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (II Cor. 6:9-11). The only kind of people who enter the kingdom of God are sinners like you and me. We are all former thieves, former adulterers, former fornicators. We were saved because we came to see our dire need. Do not chase the thief to kill him. How will he enter into the kingdom if you kill him? He might become your brother in Christ if you share the gospel with him.

Finally, the Lord sums up the secret of Christlikeness, "And just as you want men to treat you, you treat them in the same way." Matt. 7: 12 records Jesus' words this way, ". . . however you want others to do for you do

so do for them; for this is the law and the prophets." Here the Lord sums up the 39 books of the Old Testament, all that the law and the prophets were saying, in one simple but profound sentence: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you [by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit]." This is the simplicity of the gospel.

A man came to our home the other day to see my wife about something. I was outside washing my car, and I saw that his car was dirty. I thought, "Oh, Lord, don't do that to me! Don't bring those Bible verses to my mind right now. I've got my rights!" In reality, my whole life in the kingdom of God is God taking me by my shirt collar and "leading" me into righteousness. So I responded to the Lord's prompting and washed the man's car so that it looked really nice. But the hot sun quickly dried the car and the pavement so that when he came out he never noticed that I had extended myself to wash it! My flesh wanted an immediate reward rather than resting in the commandment of our Lord to treat others the way you want to be treated, by the power of the Spirit, then walk on into the next good work to the honor and glory of our Lord Jesus.

The Jews' response to these directives was probably much like ours would have been: "How in the world can we live out these words in a corrupt world filled with Romans, Greeks, and barbarians, let alone the Pharisees and corrupt, mean-spirited fellow Jews?" The key is found in Luke 6: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." They are the people who declare their spiritual bankruptcy, are indwelt by King Jesus, and receive all of his spiritual resources through the power of the Holy Spirit. That power is available to do good, to keep the law and the prophets. The whole law was summarized by our Lord when he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10 :27).

Our Lord takes the law and all the teachings of the prophets and distills it down to this simple but overpowering statement: "Just as you want men to treat you treat them in the same way." Men desire to be loved, respected, held in high esteem and treated as eternal beings. As we look at this statement we discover that the process must begin with us--"You treat them"--and then we realize that we cannot do it. This statement comes within the context of prayer in Matthew 7:7-12. We are to pray that the Lord will love men in and through us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Power will be given to us to love and to do all the law and the prophets (Luke 11:3). The Holy Spirit is given to those who ask for him.

As we look back over these guidelines for living in the kingdom of God we are reminded that our Lord Jesus Christ lived out every one of these commands on his way to the cross of Calvary. It was his lifestyle to use aggressive agape love as he depended on the Father to give him the Spirit to work this out.

The conversation with the college administrator concerned how to respond to the hostile attitude of the neighbors. Based on this passage, I asked her if she and her co-workers ever took time to investigate the problem from their neighbors' point of view. She admitted that when she went to the council meeting the neighbors were so angry she became defensive and did not look at the problem from their point of view. She then said she would spend the following week asking them for their perspective and hope for an opportunity to minister to them in the love of Christ.

How should we react towards those who hate, curse, and mistrust us? Treat them as you desire to be treated, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and be just as merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful.

II. Be just as merciful as your Father, Luke 6: 32-38

And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. And do not judge and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned [I don't think that necessarily means on this earth]. Give, and it will be

given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.

Keep in mind that it is God the Father who is protecting you; you are the sons of the Father. That passage describes a loving God who is aware of our every action, and he is the rewarder of the faithful.

Jesus follows up the Golden Rule with some practical suggestions. He challenged his disciples to break out of their conditional love patterns, saying, "And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same thing. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same amount." That is normal living, the way the world keeps things even, but the Lord does not want us to live on that level anymore. He wants us to move into a whole new arena.

Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and do good (to our enemies), and lend (to our enemies) expecting nothing in return. How in the world does one live like that? How would we ever get ahead in this world? This is the way it works now and has always worked in the past. Everything we have ever done in our community--hating our enemies, not expressing agape love, only doing good to our friends, lending them material goods, but always expecting something in return--is just as natural to us as breathing. Now we are being called to do this and not expect that we will receive anything in return! Our Lord had in mind the hopeless cases among them, those who could not help themselves and might never be in a position to repay.

John R.W. Stott writes,

...all human love, even the highest, the noblest and the best, is contaminated to some degree by the impurities of self-interest. We Christians are specifically called to love our enemies (in which love there is no self-interest) and this is impossible without the supernatural grace of God flowing through us. . . . The question Jesus asked is 'What more are you doing than others?' This simple word 'more' is the quintessence of what he is saying. It is not enough for Christians to resemble non-Christians; our calling is to outstrip them in virtue. Our righteousness is to exceed that of the Pharisees and our love is to be more than that of the Gentiles. . . .

What is the motivating factor for us to live this way? It is clearly stated: ". . . and your reward will be great." When do we get the reward? When we participate in the act of aggressive love we receive joy, love, peace and wholeness. There may be other rewards in heaven, but we receive these blessings right away. God the Father sees the love and goodness and lending from the heart of his true sons as all done to his glory--and it is not to be seen by men. As children of God we derive joy from resembling our heavenly Father--like Father, like son. Jesus added, "'And you will be sons of the Most High.'" People begin to see the sons of God resemble their Father as they extend love, expecting nothing in return. Our greatest reward is a relationship with our heavenly Father. Therefore, be like him by being merciful, just as our Father is merciful, with compassion, acts of love and deeds of kindness.

Then the Lord warns his apostles: "Do not pass judgment and you will not be judged." The Son of God commanded them to not pass judgment by being the judge, jury and hangman. We are certainly asked to be discerning, to form opinions based on someone's expressions and actions. Since we cannot know what is in his heart, however, we must be careful to not criticize. I have at times listened to gossip about someone and formed opinions based on appearances. Then when I finally sat down with the person in question, I have been rebuked because I acted like a judge and had badly missed the mark.

The Lord encouraged his apostles, "Give and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."

W.M. Hendriksen writes,

The underlying symbolism is that of the Near East grain market, but similar conditions are found all over the world. Anyone who had had anything to do with the sale of grains, fruits, or vegetables knows that a bushel loosely filled contains far less produce than one in which the grain or other agricultural products have been pressed down, shaken together, and added to until they run over the edge of the container. The promise of God here is that the person who gives generously will also receive back generously.

God wants us to have that kind of life. For by our standard of measure it will be measured to us by God who sees all. As Christians, when we look at each other, do we see Jesus? Is our standard of mercy like our Father's?

Our Lord encouraged his followers to have the same heart as their heavenly Father, a heart that is generous towards his sons and equally generous towards his enemies. Why? The issue for humanity, whether sons or enemies, is eternity. God desires that all men come to him through his Son Jesus Christ. He wants his enemies to see his Son in the loving, good, generous lives of his sons and daughters. We must pray that they will be drawn to come to Jesus as their Lord and Savior and receive the gift of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and live their new lives on earth by his power and love.

What do we do in this community when people hate us just because we love Jesus? The Lord says it clearly to his disciples: Treat all men, but especially those who are our enemies, the way you would like to be treated. When you meet people, treat them with the gracious mercy of God. What is at stake is not our rights but their eternal destiny. It was the love of Christ extended to us when we were his enemies that brought us into the kingdom of God. Now that we are in, we must not forget how we got in! Live in such a way among your enemies that they might see God the Father, his Son, and the Holy Spirit extending aggressive agape love toward them; and pray that many of them might come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior.

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