

Loving Your Enemies
Proverbs 24:17-20
July 25, 2021

Last Sunday we talked about relationships and what it meant to be a friend. I mentioned that “people skills are the most important skills we can possess.”¹ We run into all kinds of people in life. Some will become our friends, some unfortunately will become our enemies or the people who dislike us; and some will remain insignificant, like the hundreds of people we pass by each day. Managing relationships and people well is a key to success in life.

Most of us have people we like and people we don't like. With some, we have a hostile relationship. Am I exaggerating if I say, “We are a people at war in our relationships?” Not in all our relationships, of course; but in some. We may find ourselves in a combat with our spouses, children, parents, siblings, neighbors or co-workers.

So, much of our energy is consumed either in a preparation for an attack or for a defense or both. So much time and energy are spent on licking our own wounds and plotting our revenge. We want to teach a lesson to our opponent, to settle the score, and get even. Human relationships are so intermingled with endless and bountiful dramas.

We remember that Jesus taught us to “love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us.”² We often believe that loving the enemy is, in spite of what the person had done in the past, just to forgive him and to be nice to him. We think that is what loving the enemy is. I guess there is a certain amount of truth to it. While I recognize that loving the enemy includes forgiving and receiving the person into a fellowship, I wonder if “loving” could be more than that.

Nowhere in the Scripture, has Jesus ever said “Don't MAKE enemies.” In fact, Jesus' directive to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” assumes that you will have enemies and persecutors; perhaps a lot of them.

¹ From Daesun Chung's sermon, “Are You a Friend?”

² Matthew 5:44.

Sometimes, you don't even have to do anything to have other people hate you. If you stand up for some principle that you firmly believe in, someone will stand up against you. If you try to correct something that is wrong in other people, they will rise up against you. You don't necessarily make them your enemies; they do that to you. They make you their enemy. Jesus knew that. That is why he never said, "Don't make enemies." You cannot control what other people do. If you stand up for something, some people will rise up against you. They even "cancel" you. They make you their enemy whether you like it or not, whether you expected it or not.

You know Jesus had enemies, plenty of them. His disciples had them, too. In fact, all his disciples, except John, died a horrible and violent death in the hands of their haters. They received the ultimate cancelation, death, from their enemies. John was the only one who died peacefully.

Did Jesus and the disciples create a hostile environment that warranted their cruel death? Jesus made enemies by revealing an unflattering truth to the people in power, to the people who had control over all religious rituals. Jesus showed them that God could not be contained within their imperfect ritual observances. He showed them that God would not be pleased with their half-hearted obedience.

Jesus offered the priests and elders an alternative world view, a view outside their box of what was "acceptable" and "righteous." Jesus wanted them to know that a remorseful and penitent heart and humble obedience are better than religious elitism. This was offensive to them. They would not listen to him.

Because they were so oblivious, Jesus told them that the tax collectors and the prostitutes would enter the Kingdom of God before they would. When John the Baptist called for repentance, many people, including the tax collectors and the prostitutes, repented their sins, and turned their lives around but the religious leaders did not.³ They didn't believe that they needed to repent. Because of their arrogance and self-righteousness, Jesus said the tax collectors and the prostitutes had better chance of entering the Kingdom of God than they did.

³ Matthew 21:31-32.

The tax collectors were traitors in the eyes of the Jews, and the prostitutes were immoral.

Yet Jesus singled out these two groups and said to the chief priests and the elders, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you.” Can you imagine? It was the ultimate insult to them, because they believed they were the custodians of the Law and the guides on the path to the Kingdom of God. Yet Jesus pointed out how unrighteous they were and how far they were from the Kingdom of God. This was offensive. This is why Jesus became their enemy.

Jesus offended them, however, not with a “holier than thou” kind of righteous attitude. Instead, he was pointing out the truth in hopes of opening their eyes. Yes, Jesus used harsh words, because they were stiff-neck, hard-headed, and self-righteous individuals. They would not listen unless it is painfully and shamefully true. Sometimes we can “love our enemies” best by showing them, without fear, how wrong they are.

When you stand up for truth, when you point out others’ wrong doings, sometimes they make you their enemy. This is why Jesus never said, “Don’t make enemies.” Instead, he taught us how to deal with the enemies. He said, “Love your enemies.”

Stanley Hauerwas, of Duke Divinity School says, “Methodists have one theological conviction: God is nice. Methodists have one ethical corollary: We ought to be nice, too.” When we try to be nice, we must ask ourselves: “Are we being truthful to what we believe? Are we truly being helpful by enabling people to continue to live the way they do by being so called ‘nice’ to them?” Have we become so bland and so indistinguishable between what is right and what is wrong that we no longer have enemies to love?

If you love the people enough you will tell the truth in love and compassion. If they don’t listen, you would even use harsh words at times in hopes of opening their ears and hearts, so that they may change. You want to guide them and challenge them, in love of course. Not because you despise them; but because you care for them.

The Scripture says, “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles.”⁴ Let’s say you have been challenging a person to change, and that person did not want to change. Let’s say because you pointed out his faults, he decided to make you his enemy. If he failed in his life because he did not change, would you be glad? Not if you truly love him.

Sometimes true love is more difficult than just being nice. Sometimes we can “love our enemies” best by showing them without fear how wrong they are.

Most of us are afraid to speak up the truth, because we know the truth will hurt the person, and we don’t want to hurt anyone. So, by avoiding to speak the truth, the people who are doing the wrong will continue in their ways, and continue to justify their lives. They will not see anything wrong with their own lives, and they will end up thinking everyone else is wrong.

In his book, The Grace of Giving, Stephen Olford tells of a Baptist pastor during the American Revolution. His name was Peter Miller, who lived in Ephrata, Pennsylvania. He was a friend of George Washington. A man named Michael Wittman also lived in Ephrata; an evil man who did all kinds of things to oppose and humiliate the pastor.

One day Michael Wittman, the evil man, was arrested for treason and was sentenced to death. Hearing this news, Peter Miller traveled seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for the life of the traitor. When Peter pleaded for Wittman’s life, General Washington refused. Washington said, “I cannot grant you the life of your friend.” “My friend!” exclaimed the old preacher. “He’s not my friend. He is the bitterest enemy I have.” “What?” cried Washington. “You’ve walked seventy miles to save the life of your enemy?” Peter Miller pleaded that Michael Wittman needed to understand and experience God’s forgiveness, what true forgiveness, was. Otherwise, he would never have an opportunity to save his soul. Hearing that and seeing the sincerity of Peter Miller, General Washington released Michael Wittman. Peter Miller took Michael Wittman back home to Ephrata. In that long journey of returning home, they were no longer enemies but friends.⁵

⁴ Proverbs 24:17.

⁵ An illustration from www.esermons.com.

Peter Miller showed Michael Wittman how wrong he was about him, how crooked his ways were but Peter Miller did that with gentleness and compassion.

Sometimes, the people we consider our enemies could be our own brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometime we make our brothers and sisters in Christ our enemies because they speak the truth. They point out and remind us of our painful shortcomings. It is painful to hear our own faults, especially when they are true. If that ever happens, when that happens, consider this. Is it possible that pointing out our own faults could be an expression of love? Mature Christians take their “enemy’s rebuke” with humility.

At the same time mature Christians speak the truth when it is necessary, even if others make them their enemies. When that happens mature Christians are to continue to love them and pray for them.