

Leviticus 19:11-18

Romans 12:14-21

Matthew 5:43-48

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Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Words to Live By in Times Such as These
THE GOAL OF LOVE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The minister was preaching a sermon based on Jesus' command to love your enemies. She said, "Now, I'll bet that many of us feel as if we have enemies in our lives. So, raise your hand if you have many enemies." Quite a few people raised their hands. "Now," she said, "raise your hand if you have only a few enemies." Only about half as many people raised their hands. "OK," the minister said, "raise your hand if you have only one or two enemies." Even fewer people raised their hands. "See," she said, "most of us feel like we have enemies."

Then the minister said, "Now raise your hand if you have no enemies at all." She looked around and didn't see any hands raised. Just as the minister was about to continue with her sermon, she spotted a very, very old man sitting on the back row with his hand raised. With great difficulty, the old man stood up and proclaimed, "I have no enemies."

The minister was delighted and invited the old man to the front of the church. When the usher had helped the man make his way down the aisle, the minister took his hand in hers and said, "What a blessing! How old are you?" The old man said, "I'm 98 years old and I have no enemies." The minister said, "What a wonderful Christian life you lead! Tell us all how it is that you have no enemies." The old man looked the minister in the eye and said, "All of 'em have died!"

I figured a little humor wouldn't hurt as we think this morning about Jesus' words, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" and the command from Leviticus, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" and the apostle Paul's description of the Christian life, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

In this extraordinary season, we are daily being bombarded with news about our "enemies" such as ISIS and terrorists. In the middle of this political season, the rhetoric from both sides is heated and, in some cases, the other side is painted as "the enemy." Some people say our country has never been so divided.

And yet, consider this: Five weeks before the Battle of Fort Sumter in April 1861, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated to his first term as president. On Monday, March 4, 1861, he delivered his first inaugural address with the clouds of secession on the horizon. In his one-sentence second paragraph, Lincoln said, "I do not consider it necessary at present for me to discuss those matters of administration about which there is

no special anxiety or excitement.” The rest of his address dealt with the issues about which there **was** special anxiety and excitement — the question of slavery and the possibility of civil war.

After Lincoln had outlined in great detail his position on and approach to these pressing issues, he concluded with these remarks: “In **your** hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in **mine**, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail **you**. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. **You** have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to ‘preserve, protect, and defend it.’ I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”¹

Well, most of the time we’re not angels. And we’re certainly not Abraham Lincoln! So what are we supposed to do with Jesus’ hard command, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”? In fact, what are we supposed to do with most of what Jesus tells us to do in his Sermon on the Mount? Turn the other cheek. Do not be angry with your brother or sister. Do not resist an evildoer. And, as if those commands weren’t hard enough, Jesus wraps up this section of his sermon by telling us, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

One interpretation is that Jesus knew exactly what he was telling us. He knew we could never meet these requirements and act in this way. So, the commands he gives in his Sermon on the Mount were intended to highlight our sins and shortcomings and our need for God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. Well, it’s certainly true that we all are sinners and fall short of God’s glory. And it’s just as true that we all need God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. But what if Jesus really meant what he said?

Many folks have asked this past week, “Have you been watching the Olympics?” Yes, and haven’t the athletes been amazing? Simone Biles lived up to and perhaps exceeded the expectations of her in gymnastics. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never been able to figure out the scoring system in Olympics gymnastics. However, you probably have noticed that no-one ever receives a perfect “10” any more. The scoring system was changed a while back and now it’s impossible to get that score.

But forty years ago at the Summer Olympics in Montreal, Nadia Comaneci stunned and excited the world when she was awarded the first perfect “10” for her routine on the uneven bars. The manufacturer of the Olympics scoreboard, Omega SA, asked the Olympic organizers if the board needed to display four digits for gymnastics scores. The organizers told the company three digits were enough, because a perfect 10 was impossible. When Nadia was awarded the first ever perfect “10,” the scoreboard read “1.00” and the crowd didn’t realize at first what had happened. She went on to re-

ceive six additional perfect 10's and won gold medals in the all-around, the balance beam, the uneven bars, and bronze medal for the floor exercise.²

It seems as if being "perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect" is as impossible as a perfect 10 in gymnastics was thought to be. But that's hearing "perfect" as having arrived, as meeting some kind of moral or legal checklist. Actually, "perfect" here has more of the sense of working toward a goal or purpose. The Apostle Paul talks about this very thing in his letter to the Philippian Christians when he writes "that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith . . . Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (Philippians 3:8-9, 12)

In my Bible, the verses from Romans 12 are under the headings, "The New Life in Christ" and "Marks of the True Christian." Someone has said, "Our only hope for loving our enemy is to be a new creation in Christ. And our only hope for being a new creation in Christ is to be reconciled to God through the death of his Son." That's the theological foundation for Jesus' commands about how to live as his followers and citizens of the kingdom of God.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which is what you have in the pew Bibles, translates Matthew 5:44-45 this way: "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." A couple of different translations help us better understand what it means to "be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect." *The Message* translation puts it this way: "When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves." The New Living Translation really gets at what is at stake with following Jesus' commands about how to live: "But I say to you, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven."

When I was in Zambia in June 2013, I got to know a man from South Africa named Yuri. He had retired from teaching at the Justo Mwale Theological University after many years. He was a guest lecturer during the time I was on campus. We ate together on several occasions and had many lengthy conversations about the political situations in the U.S. and South Africa. In June 2013, Nelson Mandela was very ill and many people thought he might die at that time (he did die in December of that year). I asked Yuri what he thought would happen in his home country when Mandela died. Yuri said there were different opinions. One group was warning the white people to arm themselves against black violence and revenge. Yuri said cooler heads suggested that Mandela's legacy had prepared the country to move forward after his death.

On February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela was released after spending twenty-seven years in prison. In 1994 he was elected president of South Africa. In the four years between his release and his election, there was much violence and many deaths in the country. There were predictions of a great bloodbath when he became president.

Many people were convinced President Mandela would seek revenge on the white population. Instead, Mandela surprised his country and the world (and received much criticism from some of his own backers) when he not only called for peaceful relations between blacks and whites, but actually did what he was asking his people to do. He appointed Bishop Desmond Tutu to head up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with the atrocities committed during apartheid. He invited his former prison guard to be a guest of honor at his presidential inauguration ceremony. He invited the state prosecutor who had demanded the death penalty for Mandela at his trial in 1963 to enjoy a kosher meal with him. In 1995, he wore the green jersey of the national rugby team at the World Cup Final. During the years of apartheid, there was an international boycott against the South African rugby team and the Springbok jersey became a hated symbol. When the team won the championship, President Mandela presented the trophy to the team captain and said it was time to put aside hatred and enmity and become a united nation. On the twentieth anniversary of his release from prison, Mandela invited his former prison guard to join him for dinner.

Former President Bill Clinton recalled a conversation with Nelson Mandela in which he asked him, “Didn’t you really hate them for what they did?” Mandela replied, “Oh, yeah, I hated them for a long time. I broke rocks every day in prison, and I stayed alive on hate. They took a lot away from me. They took me away from my wife, and it subsequently destroyed my marriage. They took me away from seeing my children grow up. They abused me mentally and physically. And one day, I realized they could take it all except my mind and my heart. Those things I would have to give to them, and I simply decided not to give them away.” President Clinton asked President Mandela, “What about when you were getting out of prison? As you walked down that dirt road to freedom, didn’t you hate them then?” Mandela said, “As I felt the anger rising up, I thought to myself, ‘They have already had you for twenty-seven years. And if you keep hating them, they’ll have you again.’ And I said, ‘I want to be free.’ And so I let it go. I let it go. As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.”³

I have no easy answers this morning about fulfilling Jesus’ command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. The “LOVE” Jesus is talking about is not the warm fuzzy feeling you get when you’re with someone special. The “LOVE” Jesus is talking about is a verb — love in action, love that seeks the best for the other person. When you couple *that* kind of love with our Lord’s command to “be perfect,” that is, to work toward the goal of living as God’s beloved children *because of* the love God himself has already shown us in Jesus Christ, then we hear Jesus’ call to be who we are — God’s beloved children who are called to reflect and show and share God’s love, not only in what we say but also in what we do and how we treat other people — and not just the people who will love us back.

If you find today’s scripture lessons to be quite challenging, join the club! But listening to and taking seriously and living out Jesus’ command to LOVE can help us resist the siren song of hate and vengeance that saturates our society. Is it easy? No! Is

it dangerous? Could be! Does it run counter to the way the world operates? You bet! Can we be “perfect” in our love in terms of always getting it right? You know we can’t! Is LOVE the proper response to God’s mercies in our lives? Absolutely!

In the first letter bearing his name, John writes, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. . . Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. . . We love because God first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 3:1; 4:7, 19-21)

In his commentary on the letter to the Galatians, St. Jerome, a 4th/5th century theologian and church father, told an old story about John the Evangelist. When John became very old, each week his disciples would carry him into the meeting place where the congregation had gathered to worship. Each week, the weak and feeble John would say, “Little children, love one another.” After a number of weeks, perhaps wondering why the old man always said the same thing every week, they asked him, “Master, why do you always say this?” John replied, “Because it is the Lord’s command, and if this only is done, it is enough.”⁴

In a few minutes, we’re going to sing “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.” This is a way to remember that when we act in LOVE, “then [we] are working out of our true selves, our God-created selves and “In that way, you [are] acting as true children of your Father in heaven.” But our Lord Jesus reminds us that his LOVE is not just for those who love us back.

Yes, that’s a hard command to hear and even harder to do. Someone said this week, “Maybe we just need to start with the small things in our lives.” My response was, “Yes, because even the small things can become great things if we really live this way.” The goal is LOVE. Let us pray.

Let us pray: Lord, make us channels of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us bring your love. Where there is injury, let us bring pardon. Where there is despair, let us bring hope. where there is darkness, let us bring light. Where there is sadness, let us bring joy. Help us to love, even as we have been loved, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address, Monday, March 4, 1861,” at www.bartleby.com.

²“Nadia Comăneci,” at www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadia_Comănesci.”

³Philip Yancey, “Happy Birthday, Nelson Mandela,” July 19, 2013 at www.philipyancey.com. The final sentence in the quotation is taken from “Clinton on Mandela: Old story, new context?” Sunday, July 6, 2008, at www.xpostfactoid.blogspot.com.

⁴Ralph F. Wilson, “Stories about John from the Church Fathers: Love One Another,” at www.jesuswalk.com.