

WEEK TWO: “Love for Enemies”

Opening Reflection

“If we prayed for our enemies, perhaps we would be less likely internationally, to drop bombs, or locally, to spread gossip” (Amy-Jill Levine, 42).

What is your reaction to these words?



Read **Matthew 5:38-48 (NIV)**:

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ^[a] **39** But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. **40** And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. **41** If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. **42** Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor^[b] and hate your enemy.’ **44** But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** 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. **46** If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? **47** And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? **48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

1. What do you notice in this passage? What resonates with you?
2. Rather than a statement about welcoming abuse or passively accepting the violence of others, Jesus’ words in the first part of this passage are actually meant to provide his hearers with what biblical scholar Walter Wink calls the “third way,” or opportunities to express personal agency and courage (Amy-Jill Levine, 40). By refusing to engage in violence, stripping naked to offer your cloak, or walking an extra mile, the individual is maintaining personal dignity and agency, while humiliating the other. Does this change how you read this text? Why or why not?

3. “Be perfect” can feel like an impossible command. However, the Greek words indicate a future experience and can mean, *will be complete, lacking nothing*. In other words, the *process* is important. Following Jesus command requires deep personal work and growth, so that we will continue to grow in maturity. How are you growing and moving on towards wholeness and faith maturity?



Rev. Dr. Deborah Watson is Professor of New Testament at Palmer Theological Seminary, where she also serves as the Seminary Chaplain. In addition to teaching New Testament and Biblical Greek, she is the associate pastor at Narberth Presbyterian Church. She has taught French and English as a Second Language, has lived and studied in London, Paris, and Israel, and she co-facilitates tours to the Holy Land for Palmer.

Listen in as Dr. Watson shares her insight on this text:

For every Christian, and every Christian group who have been wronged in the very act of loving their neighbor, these words ring out with particular power.

In my own life, these words came into particular focus in the Fall of 2001, when I found myself at “ground zero” of the crime of fraud and identity theft, the echoes of which continue to resound to this day. The fact that this could happen to me, as I reached out in ministry and friendship to a person I thought was genuine, only to discover that their intentions were dark to the point of violence, was beyond shocking.

I was walking through the church, as the magnitude of the betrayal hit me. I remember thinking that I had a choice to make: I could become bitter; I could close down, put up protective barriers in my heart, mind and put in place physical safety measures, so that I would NEVER be prey to such wrong again. At that moment, I heard Jesus say, “I know.” I stopped, began to weep, and asked him to forgive me for forgetting that he did, indeed, know what it was to be kicked in the teeth, crucified, actually, by people he loved, and treated with compassion and sacrificial, self-giving love.

In our church, we have measures in place meant to ensure the safety of the funds and the precious people entrusted to our care. We do everything possible to avoid hurt as we reach out to the people among and around us, people who present with needs – some astounding in their magnitude – some are monetary, but always the needs are emotional and spiritual. And, despite our greatest efforts, we may get kicked in the teeth, by the very people to/with whom we engage ministry, in the very act of loving our neighbor.

What is an individual follower of Christ to do? What is a congregation to do?

In the midst, and in the wake of wrong done to us at any level, we all have a decision to make, and it is a decision that will be needed over and over again throughout our individual and shared lives. It is the decision to look at Jesus, to listen for his voice, saying to us – one and all – “I know. Now you know a bit of what it is to be “crucified” with me. Will you continue to keep your heart open, to love your neighbor, be they friend or enemy, knowing that it may cost you greatly, and trusting me, trusting your Father in heaven, to bring you through, to bring you home, and perhaps, your enemy, as well?” May it be so: for me, for you, for us.

1. What did you hear Dr. Watson say? Did anything challenge or inspire you?
2. How might looking to and remembering the crucified Christ help you when pursuing the command to love your enemies?
3. Dr. Watson encourages us as individuals to love our enemies, but how does that look on a corporate level? How does the church “love our enemies”?
4. If you could ask Dr. Watson one question, what would it be?



At the heart of the matter

“The Christian must treat his enemy as a brother, and requite his hostility with love. His behavior must be determined not by the way others treat him, but by the treatment he himself receives from Jesus; it has only one source, and that is the will of Jesus.... If our enemy cannot put up with us any longer and takes to cursing us, our immediate reaction must be to lift up our hands and bless him” (Bonhoeffer, 164-165).

1. What do you think about offering a blessing to those who hurt or speak poorly of you? Have you done this? What does that sound like without a spirit of anger?

2. Bonhoeffer says that the love Jesus talks about in Matthew 5:38-48 is what makes the Christian different, "extraordinary" and "unusual" (169). It is the distinguishing mark of those who follow Jesus. What does an extraordinary and unusual Christian look like? What does an extraordinary and unusual church look like?

Closing Reflection

Amy-Jill Levine says that loving our enemies means "praying not only for the rival team or the obnoxious boss but also for the neo-Nazi and the KKK member. They, too, are in God's image and likeness, no matter how deformed that image has become (42)."

Who might God be prompting or challenging you to pray for this week?