

HOW TO

love

YOUR ENEMIES



Ray Pritchard

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You never know what will grab someone's heart.

Mosab Hassan Yousef grew up as a Muslim. From an early age, he studied the Qur'an, memorized its teachings, said the daily prayers, and followed the way of Islam as faithfully as he could. In that respect, he was like many other young men growing up in Palestinian towns in the West Bank, with one important exception.

His father was one of the founders of Hamas, the militant terrorist organization.

You wouldn't think he would be a likely candidate for conversion, but the ways of God are beyond human explanation. In his book *Son of Hamas* (Tyndale, 2010), Yousef tells how he met a man who gave him a New Testament. Because of his interest in religious matters, he decided to read it to see for himself what it said. Naturally he started with Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. Soon he encountered the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). There he got his first unfiltered exposure to the pure teachings of Jesus.

It blew him away.

When we interviewed Yousef on American Family Radio, he told us the same story he writes in the book. He couldn't get away from the revolutionary nature of Jesus' teaching. One particular point stayed in his mind. Matthew 5:43-45 says,

"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, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."

"I was thunderstruck!" he said. This was the message he had been looking for. Soon he became a Christian. Three words so captured his heart he simply couldn't get away from them.

Love your enemies—don't hate them.
Love your enemies—don't despise them.
Love your enemies—don't kill them.

On the radio he told us, "All the other religions say, 'Love your friends' or 'Love your neighbor,' but only Jesus says, 'Love your enemies.'"

So easy to say, so hard to do. This may be the most difficult command Jesus ever gave. Even when we read it in the Bible, it is extremely difficult to believe Jesus meant what He said.

If you've got an honest-to-goodness enemy,
If you've got someone who doesn't like you,
If you have so-called friends who attacked you,
If you know people who have hurt your loved ones,
Loving your enemies may not be at the top of your list.

There are a lot of other things we would like to do to our enemies, like getting even or making them suffer like we have suffered. It's even harder when your enemies have attacked your children or your grandchildren or your spouse.

WHO ARE MY ENEMIES?

That leads to a very practical question: Who are my enemies? *In the broadest sense, an enemy is anyone who turns against me.* Jesus is not talking about enemies on the other side of the world. He is talking about personal enemies who tend to be much closer to home. In fact, home is the first place to look for our enemies. Jesus said, "**A man's enemies will be the members of his own household**" (Matthew 10:36). He mentions three close relationships that can go sour:

A father and his son,
A mother and her daughter,
A mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law.

We can easily extrapolate from that list to other close relationships, including the husband-wife relationship and relations with grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other more distant relatives. These are the people we go home to every day or interact with on more or less a regular basis. Every week we work with or go to school with people who may dislike us. We may even come to church and see people we would rather not see. Many of our enemies are found in our immediate sphere of influence. If this teaching of Jesus about loving our enemies is going to work, it must work first in the relationships closest to us. You have to learn to deal with the people closest to you before you can impact the world around you.

Most of us have encountered some enemies along the way. Friends come and go, but enemies accumulate. Nothing seems more natural than to hate those who have hurt us deeply. Yet Jesus said, “Love your enemies.” How can we do this?

UNHAPPY IN BABYLON

We can find some help from a story tucked away in Jeremiah 29. Here’s the background. The year was 597 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and his mighty army have come once again to the gates of Jerusalem. They had come once before, in 605 B.C. That’s when they took Daniel and his friends into exile in Babylon. Now eight years later, they have returned to Jerusalem to take another group of Jews into exile. It was a humiliating experience for the people of God. It was also a punishment from the Lord because of their rebellion. In a true sense, they got what was coming to them—70 years in captivity in a foreign land, ruled by pagans who did not worship God.

Not all the Jews were taken to Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah was allowed to remain in Jerusalem. Chapter 29 records a letter he sent from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon in order to encourage them. God’s message is unexpected: **“Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper”** (v. 7). God’s word is very simple: I put you in Babylon for a purpose. Although I know you are humiliated, discouraged, and angry, do not despair. Pray for the prosperity of Babylon.

Read that last phrase of verse 7 very carefully: **“If it prospers, you too will prosper.”** *Here is a message from God for all of us.* Many who read these words find themselves caught in a bad situation at work, or at school, or at home. Someone has hurt you deeply and it’s all you can do not to strike back. With all your energy, you barely hold back the bitterness. Some of it sloshes over the top now and then. You couldn’t pray for your enemies if your life depended on it. But God says to do it anyway. That’s the whole point of Jeremiah 29:7.

Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace, is used three times in this verse. Besides peace, it means blessing, wholeness, completeness, the absence of conflict, prosperity. Here is the shocking fact—at least it would have been shocking to the Jewish exiles. *God ties their blessing to the blessing of the Babylonians.* This seems counterintuitive since the exiles were God’s people and the Babylonians were pagans. *He is really saying they were better off in Babylon, and Babylon is better off because they were there.* Said another way, we can summarize verse seven this way:

You need Babylon!
Babylon needs you!

Immediately one can imagine any number of objections the Jews might have raised:

“These people are pagans.”
“They invaded our land.”
“They destroyed our city.”
“They burned down the temple we built to worship God.”
“They’re vile people—killers and rapists.”
“Why would I want to pray for them? They don’t deserve it.”

It was all true. The Babylonians were not nice people. You really can’t be a nice barbaric killer. There is no such category. To spread their kingdom, the Babylonians acted ruthlessly against anyone who dared to oppose them. Life was cheap, death was easy, and torture a means of sending a message to future foes.

God says to his discouraged people, “I know you don’t like it in Babylon, but that doesn’t matter. You’re going to be here for a while so settle down and make the best of it. Don’t treat the Babylonians as they treated you. Seek to bless and be a blessing. Pray for the Babylonians. They certainly need the prayers. And you, my people, need to pray. As you pray, I will bless them. And in blessing them, you too will be blessed.”

THE WORLD VS. GOD

Nothing seems more natural than to hate those who have mistreated us. But here we learn a better way. After I had preached on this topic, a man said to me, “Everything the world says about human relationships is wrong!”

The world says, “Get even.”
God says, “Seek the good of those who have harmed you.”

The world says, “Get angry.”
God says, “Pray for them.”

The world says, “Don’t waste time loving bad people.”
God says, “Love them anyway.”

We need to pray for our enemies, and they need our prayers.

If we don’t pray for our enemies, who will?
If we don’t pray for our enemies, how will they ever change?
If we don’t pray for our enemies, how will we ever be free from bitterness?

Every time we are faced with people who mistreat us, we have three options:
1) *We can hate them with total hatred.* That accomplishes nothing.
2) *We can struggle to hold back our anger.* That will emotionally exhaust us.

3) *We can pray for God to bless them.* That opens the door for God to bless us as well.

“Love your enemies.” Easy to say, hard to do.

What does it mean to love the people who have ruined everything you hold dear?

How do you pray for someone you despise?

How do you seek the good of people you wish were dead?

Why would you seek their prosperity after what they did to you?

HOW ARE WE TO LOVE OUR ENEMIES?

Here are seven suggestions that will move us in the right direction.

1) Greet Them

We often overlook this simple step. One part of loving our enemies is greeting them graciously when we see them. Sometimes instead of turning the other cheek, we turn away so we won't have to say hello to someone who hurt us. Some of us have been quite adept at looking the other way, ducking into a room, crossing the street, or even using Caller ID to keep from greeting people we don't like. But if we only greet our friends, what benefit is that? Do not even sinners greet each other? One part of loving your enemies is to greet them instead of avoiding them. Smile, shake hands, and say hello to your enemies. It's a good first step.

2) Disarm Them

That's what you do when you turn the other cheek or go the second mile. *You disarm them by doing the very thing they least expect.* You do it by speaking well of them when no one expects it. General Robert E. Lee was once asked his opinion of a fellow officer who was widely known as one of Lee's greatest detractors. The general responded that he thought the man a very fine officer. "But General," his questioner replied, quite perplexed, "I guess you don't know what he's been saying about you." "Oh, yes I do," replied Lee. "But I was asked my opinion of him, not his opinion of me."

3) Do Good to Them

It's fascinating that in Luke 6, when Jesus said, "**Love your enemies**" (verses 27,35), both times he immediately added, "**Do good to them**" so we wouldn't miss the point. Doing good to your enemies means seeing beyond your pain and their meanness to their humanity. It means seeing them as people made in the image of God and understanding there is something twisted inside that causes them to do what they do. Doing good means doing what will promote their healing despite the way they have treated you. You make the first move. You send the e-mail. You pick up the phone. You make the contact. You bridge the gap. You set up the appointment.

But what if they don't respond well? That doesn't matter. We're not in charge of how people respond to us. Make the first move and let the Lord take care of the results.

4) Refuse to Speak Evil of Them

That's what Jesus meant when he said, **"Bless those who curse you"** (Luke 6:28). It means you choose not to think evil thoughts, and you refuse to speak evil words against those who have wronged you. Proverbs has a great deal to say about the power of words. **"The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit"** (Proverbs 18:21). Every time we open our mouth, life or death comes out. I am increasingly impressed with this thought: *Forgiveness in many cases is not possible because we will not stop talking.* As long as we talk over and over again about how others have hurt us, we will never find the strength to forgive. At some point, we have to stop talking and start forgiving. Here is the simple truth:

**You can criticize the Babylonians, or
You can pray for them.**

But you can't do both at the same time.

I once knew a man whose wife had been repeatedly and publicly criticized for something she had written. When I asked how she was handling it, he said, "She has taken a vow of silence." She would not speak to her critics because nothing she said would satisfy them, and she would not speak of her critics for the good of her own soul.

Perhaps some of us need to take a vow of silence so we can let go of bitterness and get on with life.

5) Thank God for Them

If you believe in the sovereignty of God, you must believe your enemies are sent to you by God's design and with God's approval. If Satan could not tempt Job without God's permission, and if Satan could not sift Peter without Jesus' permission, your enemies could not torment you without God's permission.

I believe God places in your life every person you need for your spiritual growth. He'll send a Saul, a David, an Esau, a Daniel, an Absalom, an Esther, a Judas, a Barnabas, and a Timothy. God uses each one to teach you something and to make you more like Jesus.

Behind your enemy stands the hand of God. God would never permit it if he did not intend to bring something good out of it. You should take a picture of your enemy, stick it on your refrigerator door, and thank God for your enemy every time you look at the picture.

6) Pray for Them

When German pastor Martin Niemöller was arrested by the Nazis in World War II, he prayed daily from his prison cell for his captors. Other prisoners asked why he prayed for those who were his enemies. “Do you know anyone who needs your prayers more than your enemies?” he replied. But what if you hate the person you are praying for? Tell that to the Lord. He won’t be surprised. Then say something like this, “Lord, I hate this person, but you already know that. I ask you to love this person through me because I can’t do it in my own power. I ask you for a love I don’t have and can’t begin to produce.” God will not turn you away when you come with an honest heart, admitting you need his love to flow through you.

7) Ask God to Bless Them

Here’s a simple way to do that. *When faced with someone who has mistreated you, ask God to do for them what you want God to do for you.* Seek the same blessing for them that you seek for yourself. Think of it this way: The greater the hurt, the greater the potential blessing that will come when we forgive from the heart and by God’s grace bless those who curse us.

A woman wrote me to say she realized she needed to forgive her husband who left her for another woman after many years of marriage. She found out he had been having an affair for the previous year. To make matters worse, she discovered that some of her friends not only knew about the affair, they were aiding her husband and helping him cover up his infidelity. When she wrote to me, she said she realized she had never truly forgiven those friends for what they had done. Here is her story:

Today I wrote to four people the Lord brought to my mind. I felt driven to tell them I had prayed for them to receive a blessing from God. It was the hardest thing I had done in soooooo long, but then as I started writing the quick message telling them after hearing a sermon (didn’t say on what) that I was writing to tell them I’d asked God to give them a special blessing. Three of the four people have claimed to be Christians, but they all contributed to my ex’s infidelity and adultery. Yet, after writing the emails, I felt better and more at peace.

This is a good example because she did not mention their sin. She simply wrote to say she was praying for them to receive a blessing from the Lord. How did they respond to those notes? I don’t know and it doesn’t matter. She did what she needed to do, and it set her free.

Let me offer one final word: *Your enemy is a gift from God to you.* To say that is not to excuse evil or to condone mistreatment. It does not cancel the need for punishment when a crime has been committed. It is to say exactly what Joseph meant when he said to his brothers, **“You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”** (Genesis 50:20). Our enemies humble us, they keep us on our knees, they reveal our weakness, and they expose our desperate need for God. Strange as it may sound, we need

the enemies God sends to us. *If we didn't need them, he wouldn't send them.* Therefore, we thank God who knows best, and we love our enemies the best way we can. Often God raises up an enemy to see if we really want to be like Jesus. He will keep our enemies alive and well as long as we need them.

Jesus had enemies. They killed him. He loved them anyway. Do you want to be like Jesus?

“I WOULD RATHER DIE THAN HATE YOU”

In 1957 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached on “Loving Your Enemies” at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. As he came to the end of his sermon, he said there is a little tree planted on a little hill on the other side of the world, and on that tree hangs the most influential person who ever lived. *In the cross of Christ, the love of God has broken through into human history.* Now we know what love looks like in a world filled with hatred, distrust, bitterness, pain, mistreatment and abuse. As the hymn writer said,

*See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

It is a message from God that love is the only way. It's the only way to heaven, and it's the only way to live on earth. If we believe in Jesus at all, we must say to our enemies, “I love you. I would rather die than hate you.”

Mosab Hassan Yousef is right.

Only Jesus says, “Love your enemies.”

Now it's time for us to do it.

Heavenly Father, some of us desperately need this message right now. We're all going to need it soon because we live in a broken world. Give us grace to love our enemies. We'll never do this without you. We say in the words of an ancient prayer, “Where there is hatred, let us sow love.” In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOING DEEPER

1. Who are the enemies in your life?
2. Which is harder for you—to speak to your enemies or to pray for your enemies?
3. Read Luke 6:27-36. Why did Jesus tell us to turn the other cheek?
4. Name someone who is a good role model of showing love to difficult people.
5. What steps do you need to take to love your enemies?

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