

Exodus 23:4-5 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁴When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.

⁵When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.^[a]

MATTHEW - Love for Enemies – not read

⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,^[c] what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Luke 6 - Love for Enemies

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.^[e] Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Judging Others

³⁷“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Romans 12:20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁰No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”

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Exodus 23: 4-5; Romans 12: 20; Luke 6:27-38

Loving the Unlovable

Kerra Becker English

Let's chalk this up as exactly what we wish Jesus didn't say, right?

Love your enemies.

Do Good to those who hate you

Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you.

Some of the other "love" sayings of Jesus make much more sense. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Love your friends. We already are pretty good at doing things for the people who do stuff for us. We try to take care of our kids. But for those things, we only receive partial credit from Jesus. When it comes to love – there's more.

He is recorded – twice - giving this same message - in the two "sermons" we have from him – love your enemies.

Uh – do we have to?

Exodus makes more sense to me. Moses gives us some instruction about the good we need to do for our enemies too. You have to help your enemy's animals if they are in trouble. I can do that. Be kind to your neighbor's ox or donkey. In Brandermill where I live, no problemo, very few oxen or donkeys to have to look out for, and not a lot of enemies either. But I get that we may have to translate this message for a not so agrarian age. Today, it may mean that you help that neighbor you don't really like to catch their dog that got loose again. Or since oxen and donkeys were work animals, it may mean you help your enemy get to work if their car is broken down. It may also mean that you give the kid who makes fun of your kid a ride to school when she misses the bus. You don't want to. You may not love it or get any thanks – but it's not doing you any good to wish ill on your enemy's pet, or make them miss a day of work or school.

But this isn't love. It may be kindness. It may be good-heartedness in general. But I dare say that it isn't me LOVING my enemy to simply offer them human decency.

I must say I like Paul's take on this too in Romans. He's being watched for how carefully he's following the teachings of Jesus, so he can't discount completely this idea of loving your enemies. However, he says, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If she's thirsty, give her something to drink. BECAUSE by doing this you will heap burning coals upon their heads. Paul has this little revenge thing going. Do good to your enemy – BECAUSE they will absolutely hate it. You get to revel in the schadenfreude (sha – den -freu- de) in that their misery is compounded by having to take your help. Schadenfreude is such a great and ultimately very German word that means taking pleasure in someone else's misfortune. Paul lets us do that. I don't think Jesus would.

Giving your enemy food or drink so they have to take handouts from someone they hate is not love. It may not even be as kind as unburdening your enemy's donkey from an unbearable load.

It's sad how much though this thought can be appealing. How often have I wanted to be super nice to that person who was tormenting me – just to tick them off. Let's not think about that too much, shall we?

Jesus said if you have enemies, and we all probably do, then - love them. Be good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for your abuser. It seems reckless, and perhaps not very good emotional counsel. Much harm has been done by the church invoking this line of Jesus to dismiss dreadful things done in Jesus' name. Praying for abusers seems out of the question. Blessing those who have made your life hell seems too much to ask – even for Jesus.

This section of Jesus' most famous sermon – that he delivers slightly differently to two different congregations – as you do as a pastor – is quoted often, but rarely in its entirety. Do unto others. Do not judge. We like those parts. But love your enemies, do good, and lend money. Those imperatives – not so much.

We wonder, to whom do these statements really apply? Is it really just offering kindness to the guy on the block who likes to report the infractions of fellow neighbors to the Home Owners Association? That's enemy-lite right there. It may be annoying at times – but we're not doing battle any time soon. I'd go so far as to bring back his stray donkey and it wouldn't do me any harm whatsoever.

It's that Jesus is talking about oppressors and abusers that takes our breath away. Do good to those who hate you. Pray for those who abuse you. I am NOT good at this. My sense of justice, which is probably more like righteous indignation, absolutely gets in the way. And the real kicker for me is that in the crowds of people he's aiming this sermon toward are those who have been hated, and those who have been abused. Those people have to be there – because they are in

every crowd, and every congregation. I may not feel particularly beat up in my life right now – but I've been there. I've known the pain. What good does it do to let the bullies win? Because sometimes that's what it seems like happens when we don't get our proper revenge.

Another preacher who happened to offer his sermons with a reggae beat, Bob Marley, has a line in "Redemption Song" that maybe can help us to understand what Jesus means by telling us to love our enemies. Marley sings, "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds." And then he goes on to sing the refrain, "Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom? Cause all I ever have, redemption songs."

Jesus is also offering us a redemption song. It may not free the other to share our food and water, or even lend them money in need. It may not free the other to offer prayers for the one who wounded you to the core. It may not free the other to bless the person who showed you what hell could be. The person it does free is the one who loves and forgives and prays and blesses. Be merciful, Jesus tells us, as your Father in heaven has been merciful. Emancipate YOURSELF from mental slavery. Your hater, your oppressor, your judge doesn't get to have that power over you – no, not any more.

I can tell you this. I'm not going to quit seeking justice. It is part of the Christian faith to work for a better, kinder, more loving world out there. But what I also need to remember, and remember, and remember is to be merciful, to do less judging and more praying. To offer more grace and more gratitude – and let the grumbling fall more to the way side. Jesus imagined that it could work to change the world. Really, he did. I know that he did because he was willing to die believing it. He loved his enemies, even as he hung on the cross.

Is he asking THAT of us? He could be. We all need to figure out the limits of our human endurance, that's for sure. But yes, he tells us, directly and without question, "Love your enemies." Love them. It's a work in progress. Well, it's WORK anyhow, whether I'm making progress or not may remain to be seen. Pray. That's what he asks of us. Pray. Doesn't mean that I have to engage those folks who have wounded me worst, but I can begin to change my own heart, even if it does nothing for anyone else's.

This is the hard work my friends, the part that they don't immediately tell you about when you join the church. Except that we kind of do. The baptism questions lead us to renounce sin, and put our complete and full trust in Jesus Christ, the one who calls us to love even when it seems impossible to do so. Jesus, Jesus calls us to love the unlovable. Which means that Jesus won't let anyone, anyone escape the possibility of receiving the fullest measure of God's love. That, is a gift, a treasure, the real reason we all long to be here, here in the place where we will honor even the hard sayings of Jesus. You, me. We are called to love this world, all of it. Amen.