

Love Evil?

By Anand Peter

I do not think anyone can dispute that, in proportions small or great, every one of us encounters evil, time and again, in our lives. It is equally true that Jesus would never tempt us with evil. The perpetrators, invariably, are our fellow human beings — at home, at school, at work, in the marketplace, at church, and in society at large. When this happens, we treat all those who wish us ill, or, in the extreme, those who set out to destroy us, as our enemies. Our first thought is to repay evil with evil. If we are not capable of that, or if no opportunity presents itself, we content ourselves with wishing evil upon them, or taking a quiet pleasure in seeing them brought low. Jesus, however, wants us to be different, and He tells us how.

In Luke 6:27-36, Jesus addresses situations of conflict directly. His first assertion is this: "But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you" (Luke 6:27-28). It may seem to require something like a superhuman effort to do good to those who hate us, or to bless and pray for them — a command that appears to lie beyond our natural ability to obey. That is not, one might argue, the natural way for anyone to respond to conflict in life. But Jesus understands our frame of mind, and our limitations, and so He gives us the antidote: He asks us to cultivate the virtue of unconditional love, given without any expectation of reciprocity.

Our model for how to love is Jesus Himself. Paul's words in Romans 12:14, "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not," echo closely what Jesus says in Luke 6:28. There are further echoes of Jesus' teaching throughout the rest of that chapter, and Christ's own love for others, shown at the Cross, is stressed again in Romans 15:1-3 — Paul is hinting, throughout, that to love genuinely is to love as Jesus loved. And our passage in Romans does not simply say "love others more"; it sets out very specific behaviour for loving others. Paul, expounding what Jesus taught, writes: "Let love be without dissimulation" (Romans 12:9a) — warning us, in other words, against a pretence of love, which we practise more often than we might like to admit. Romans 12:9-21, indeed, amounts to a practical guide to loving as Jesus loved. In this passage, Paul shows us that love is an action, not merely an emotion. Consequently, we can love even those we might consider unworthy of our love, unlovely, or downright unlovable — we can love even our enemy, or our persecutor. Paul's argument is a simple one: love without action is not love; sincere Christians wear no masks, but embody true love in how they act toward others.

How, then, are we to live out true love? In Romans 12:9b, Paul defines it through two commands: "Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good." To abhor is to feel an intense dislike for something — we are to hate evil strongly, yet without hating the one who does it. Paul wants us intimately bound to whatever is good. This passage challenges us to spend real time in meditation upon it. We should ask ourselves, repeatedly: do I abhor what is evil? Am I roused, truly, against pride, selfishness, favouritism, revenge, and other ungodly behaviour? And then ask: do I cleave to what is

good? Am I truly taken up with humility, selflessness, generosity, and a spirit of service? Love without action, once again, is not love.

Our natural response is to hate, and to hurt, those who set themselves against us. That was the prevailing philosophy of the world in Jesus' day, just as it remains the philosophy of much of the world today — that one should do harm to one's enemies and good to one's friends. Christians, sadly, have often adopted much the same attitude. This was already a problem in the first century, when the Jews of that time had adopted the very same worldly philosophy, though God had clearly condemned it in Scripture. We read, in Leviticus 19:18, "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD." Many rabbis, however, taught that this verse applied only to relationships within Israel — that brotherly love had its limits. In our own terms, that would be rather like teaching that we are not to bear a grudge against a fellow Christian, but that we may bear one freely against anyone outside the family of faith. This is precisely the thinking Jesus is teaching against in these instructions — instructions we, too, fail to follow more often than we would like. We want to love only our friends and family; Jesus commands us to love our enemies as well, and, mercifully, He does not leave the command there, but goes on to teach us what loving our enemies actually involves.

"Do good to those who hate you." We often believe we are doing well enough if we simply do not hate those who hate us — if we remain unshaken and unconcerned by their hostility. But loving our enemies is not merely the absence of retaliation. It does not mean only that we do not strike back; it does not mean only that we decline to treat others as they have treated us. Jesus is calling for something positive: active good done toward our enemies. There is no room here for an excuse — no "yes, but consider what he did to me." We are never justified in withholding good treatment from anyone.

Jesus goes further still: "Bless those who curse you." It is not only our actions that are to be positive toward our enemies, but our words as well. To bless someone is to invoke God's favour upon them, or at the very least to appeal to God on their behalf. It is difficult to answer cursing with grace and kindness — our instinct is to respond with the same fury and intensity we receive. Jesus calls us to an entirely unnatural response: do not repay mistreatment with mistreatment; instead, do good, speak graciously, and pray to God for those who wrong us — pray that they might change, that they might repent, that they might themselves become His disciples. Stephen stands as a striking example of this, in Acts chapter seven: even as the people were stoning him to death, he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:60).

Jesus then tells us to turn the other cheek if someone strikes us — a much-misunderstood teaching, often attributed in popular memory to Mahatma Gandhi, and too often taken in a narrowly literal sense. The slap upon the cheek is, in fact, idiomatic for an insult; this is not a teaching about physical violence. The same reading fits Luke 6:22, where Jesus warns that we will be insulted for His sake: when insulted, we are not to retaliate, but to be willing, again and again, to bear insult and humiliation for Christ's sake. Cementing this teaching, Jesus goes on to tell us not to withhold from anyone who is genuinely in need, but to give freely to all who ask something of us. Too often we grow stingy instead — an attitude both

ugly and unbecoming of those who are truly God's people. We are called not merely to meet another's need, but to go beyond it: to walk, as it were, the extra mile.

Then Jesus tells us, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." This is the overarching principle that governs how we are to love our enemies. It is only natural for spiritually inappropriate thoughts to arise concerning those we regard as our enemies; when they do, we need only ask ourselves whether we would find it acceptable were others to act toward us in the same way. If not, we ought not to act that way toward them. In every such situation, we do well to ask what Jesus would do, and to act accordingly, for Jesus gathers up all these principles into a single command: love your neighbour as yourself.

Finally, remember that God is kind to us, ungrateful and undeserving as we are. We, too, must be merciful, just as our Heavenly Father is merciful. Consider the good Jesus has done for us while we were yet His enemies, and yet sinful. We are to do good, and to be merciful, to our own enemies precisely because of what Jesus has done for us — and this is the only fitting way we have of expressing our gratitude for His innumerable mercies and blessings, showered upon us day after day. Amen.