

Grace Beyond Measure: Loving the Unlovable

1. Warm up: If you could remove one verse from the Bible, which one would it be? Your answer can be silly or serious, as you wish. ☺
2. On Sunday, Pastor Robert said that, if given the opportunity, the one verse he'd be tempted to remove is when Jesus says, "Love your enemy." Let's read the full passage together, Matthew 5:43-48 as printed on p. 3.
 - a. In the time of Jesus, many people believed you could love your neighbor and hate your enemy and still be right with God. There's a part of all of us that wishes that were true. Hate is instinctive. Who's someone you'd be tempted to hate if hate was allowed? Why are you tempted to hate them?
 - b. In this week's scripture passage Jesus teaches us that if we want to be a real Christian, if we want the Lord to look at us and say "well done," if we want to change the world, we can't just love those who love us, we have to love our enemies! In the context of the time, Jesus was talking about how his people, the Jews, felt toward their brutal Roman occupiers and fellow Jews who cooperated with the Romans. When people heard Jesus saying they should love their occupiers and those who collaborated with their occupiers, how do you think they felt? How would you have felt?
3. Pastor Robert suggested that learning to love our enemies begins with reframing how we see them. He quoted Thich Nhat Hanh, who said, "When you look deeply into your anger, you will see that the person you call your enemy is also suffering. When you are able to love your enemy, he or she is no longer your enemy. The idea of enemy vanishes and is replaced by the notion of someone who is suffering and needs your compassion."
 - a. When Hanh says "your enemy is also suffering," what do you think he means? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
 - b. Think of someone you have been (or are now) tempted to hate. Do you believe they were/are suffering? If so, how? And does it help to see them as someone who's suffering?
 - c. Robert told how, in 5th grade, his friends literally thrust him into a circle to fight his enemy, Kevin Dudley, who constantly referred to Robert as "Robert Fag-erson." What Robert learned from that experience is, "never let anyone else tell you who to hate or who you have to fight." Who's someone in your own personal life that others in your circle of friends expect you to hate because of what they've done? Are you letting their perspective affect yours?
4. Reframing how we think about our enemy also involves seeing them as our "neighbor," instead of enemy. The Greek word for neighbor literally means "near person." The word isn't referring to residential proximity, but rather human proximity. In other words,

seeing our enemy as our neighbor means seeing how much we're alike. It's a lot harder to hate someone when we get in touch with our own flaws and begin to see similarities between their flaws and ours. What's something you hate when other people do it to you, but that (if you're honest) you too have sometimes done to others?

5. "Grace beyond measure," Robert said, "begins when I decide that I will not mirror [my enemy's] reaction to me." Instead, Jesus gives us three very practical, specific instructions about how we should respond to our enemies. First, in verse 44 Jesus says, **"Do good to those who hate you."**
 - a. Tell us about a time when you saw someone live this principle, doing good to someone who hated them. What happened? How did their kindness affect their enemy?
 - b. Think of someone you're tempted to see as an enemy. Give a concrete example of something good you could do for them.
6. Second, Jesus says, **"Bless those who curse you."** The Greek word for "bless" means "to speak well of." Sometimes that can take the form of simply being silent, instead of getting drawn into a tit-for-tat exchange. Etymologically, the Greek word for "bless" gave rise to our English word "eulogy." That caused Robert to suggest that loving our enemy doesn't always require that we become their best buddy. Sometimes, for our own wellbeing, it may simply mean that I say to myself, "I'm done with this, I'm burying the matter. I'm not going to get dragged into the drama and respond in kind." Is there someone in your life right now who's trying to drag you into confrontation, and you simply need to not take the bait? Are you taking the bait? Tell us about it.
7. Third, Jesus says, **"Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."** Note that Jesus says, "Pray for them," not "Pray about them."
 - a. What's the difference between "praying about someone" versus "praying for them?" Why is this difference so important?
 - b. Tell us how you're praying for someone you're tempted to hate. Specifically, what are you asking God to do for them?
 - c. In verse 45, Jesus says that if we apply the foregoing three principles to someone we're tempted to hate, we will become authentic children of God. Suppose you did apply the foregoing three principles to someone you're tempted to hate. How do you think it would impact you? How might it impact them?
8. After being imprisoned for 27 years for his efforts to end apartheid, Nelson Mandela emerged from prison advocating reconciliation rather than revenge. Mandela said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemy." What do you think he meant? Do you agree? Why or why not?

Matthew 5:43-48

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, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet your friends only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? ⁴⁸ Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”