

Praying for Your 'Enemies'

One of the most important teachings of Jesus on prayer is one you don't hear much about: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Mt 5.44b). Paul says much the same in Romans: 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse' (Rom 12.14). 'Love' raises all sorts of questions about what it means to love, questions that arise because in modern English, 'love' is overwhelmingly associated (when it's not clearly trivial, as in 'I love ice cream') with either romantic/erotic love or familial love. The space in the middle, between the trivial and the familial or erotic, has no suitable word in English. It's all right to like your friends, but saying you love them would be excessive and even embarrassing, for many speakers of English.

How, then, are modern Christians, specifically speakers of English, supposed to understand these verses of the Bible? How can any person be both someone to love and an 'enemy'? These are large questions and for the moment, I'm not going to go into them. For the moment, let's just focus on two of the stark imperatives in what both Jesus and Paul say: 'pray for' and 'bless'. If you're stumped as to how you could love someone who is persecuting you (however you understand 'persecute'), at the very least, it's clear that we are to pray for and bless those who are not our lovers, our spouses, our families, even our friends. The Christian sphere of care extends well beyond those who care for us. It is, like the love of the Father, Son and Spirit, without boundaries.

Neither Jesus nor Paul puts the matter that simply, perhaps because they knew that if you say 'There should be no limit to your compassion', people might nod but that would not mean they would actually, in practice, extend the sphere of their concern—to, for example, people they actively dislike or who seem to be militating against them in some way.

The teaching of the New Testament is sometimes phrased in prohibitions ('When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites', Mt 6.5), but most often, it advocates positively, as it does in the two verses cited above. This may sound good—not so many Thou shalt nots—except that positive commands generally present a harder mission. Your task is not simply to avoid stepping on the cracks in the pavement, but to do something larger, something as potentially boundless as Jesus' own heart. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example of this: you can't weasel out of the command to love your neighbour by devising legalistic parameters for who counts as your neighbour.

Likewise the command to pray for our enemies and bless those who persecute: it is a refusal to build ramparts around our hearts. How does this precept fit into the teaching about continual prayer? Think of what passes through your mind on an hourly, even minute by minute basis. How often are those thoughts the responses of impatience, irritation, scorn, or anger at those who cross your path? From the inconsiderate driver who will not use a turn signal to the colleague whose thoughtless joke stabbed at something you love, to the reports of manipulation, greed, or cruelty we all read about in the news, there is enough we encounter on an average day to keep us seething for hours.

The seething may be an understandable response, but does not actually make us happier. Nor does it make the inconsiderate, unkind or cruel elements in the world any less so. You may be unable to do anything about those others—but you can do something about yourself and you can do something for Christ. That something is prayer.

When, instead of fuming or swearing, you pray for the driver whose mind doesn't seem to be on the road just now, you keep yourself calmer and you may, in some way that can't be calculated, help that driver and perhaps prevent a later accident: 'Lord, bless this person's going out and returning home, that in all their ways, they come closer to you'.

Or take the colleague who sneers in meetings at anything you do, while taking credit for things they did not actually do themselves. Suppose rather than calling that person out in front of everyone else or carping behind their back, you pray 'Lord, do every good thing that is your will for this person'. You're not presuming you know what this person needs. You're not using prayer as a passive-aggressive weapon ('Lord, help X to see the light and repent of his ways'). You are aligning your will with God's, acknowledging the divine purpose for all of us and acknowledging that your knowledge and compassion are finite. You don't know what God's desire for this person is. Perhaps she does need to repent. Perhaps she, like you, just needs a broader vision and a larger heart—or perhaps you do. Be thankful you don't have to judge: that's God's job, God who is infinitely better qualified for this job than you are.

Your task, your privilege and scripture-given task, is to pray. Start forming the habit of praying for anyone you find yourself irritated with or angry at. If, God forbid, you notice hate starting to take root in your heart, strike it at the root immediately by praying for the one you think you're tempted to hate. You can always fall back on the sure words of scripture: "May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face shine upon you and be very gracious to you; may the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Numbers 6.24-26). You might feel that you don't actually believe those words, as applied to the object of your ire, but by praying them, you are acknowledging before God that you *want* to desire what God desires for every one of his children: that we grow more and more into his likeness, his goodness and love.

Your choice is either to align yourself with that desire or to risk marinating yourself in railing and self-righteousness. One way leads to spiritual life, the other to a slow death by incremental lovelessness. So choose life: pray constantly for those who sadden or enrage you. Bless those who curse you, even if your blessing is simply the acceptance that God desires to bless them. In all likelihood, you will not lack for opportunities to offer such prayers and so will come closer to the ideal of continual prayer, constant communion with God in your heart.

'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.'