

Loving our Enemies
Dr. K. A. Korb
16 March 2012

After the increase of attacks on churches in Northern Nigeria, Christians need to thoughtfully consider what our response should be. Jesus left no question about what his followers should do in response to persecution. Jesus' command is very clear: "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (NIV; Luke 6:27-28).

The command to love, bless, and pray for one's enemies is probably the most difficult command that Jesus gave to his followers. Why would Jesus give a command that is so difficult to follow? Why would a loving God require something from his children that is humanly impossible?

A loving God would not give a command without good reason. Neither would Jesus give a command that He intended his followers to ignore. Therefore, let us consider four reasons why the loving Most High God may have commanded his children to love their enemies.

Change Our Thoughts

First, when we do good to those who hate us, we might realize that there is an error in our thinking. Perhaps we have named some people as our enemies who actually are *not* our enemies. In the market, Rachel may see a woman wearing a head scarf and assume she is an enemy. However, because Rachel knows that Jesus commanded her to love her enemy, she smiles and greets the other woman. The woman wearing the head scarf kindly greets her back, and they end up having a long conversation, exchanging phone numbers, and departing as friends. By loving her enemy, Rachel discovered that a person she thought was her enemy based on her religion was actually a lovely woman who shared similar challenges and hopes for the future.

Sometimes we view a person as our enemy simply because of their ethnic or religious group. We do not know the person, but we unfairly stereotype them based on their group affiliation. When we love that person, then we get to know them better and realize that they may not, in fact, be our enemy. Thus, loving our enemies may change our hearts and our attitudes so that we get to know a person based on who they are instead of the stereotypes that we have of their ethnic group or religion. As a result, we are shaped more into the image of Christ who loved all human beings, even those who were from a different ethnic group or religion.

Change Our Actions

In the first case, we incorrectly believe that a certain person is an enemy because of ignorance and stereotypes. However, there are other people whom we view as enemies who have personally injured us. The second reason why Jesus may have made the impossible command is that loving our enemies may help us change our own actions, which can transform the relationship we have with our enemies. In this instance, loving our enemy may open a door for us to dialogue with our enemy, and help us realize that they have hurt us because we first hurt them.

Rarely will a person knowingly wound another person without provocation. Every parent knows this by their children's behavior: a girl cries to her mother that her younger brother hit her. The mother then asks her daughter, "What did you do to provoke your little brother?" Most times, a little brother will hit his sister because his sister first somehow hurt his feelings.

In this second case, my enemy really has done something to wound me. However, it is unlikely that my enemy wounded me out of pure malice. Instead, they probably felt that I had first acted unjustly towards them. My enemy's belief of being treated unfairly may be accurate or may be the result of a misunderstanding. Perhaps I did hurt her, but I didn't realize that I had. Or maybe she misunderstood my behavior. Or maybe I had hurt her on purpose, because of a previous time when she had acted unfairly toward me.

Regardless, if I respond to my enemy's unkindness with another act of unkindness, then the cycle of hatred and injustice will continue. However, if I respond to her unkindness with love, then the cycle of hatred has been broken and we can discuss the problems in our relationship. By loving my enemy, a door is open to dialogue about our relationship. Through that dialogue, I may realize that some of my actions toward her are not as honorable as they should be. Thus, loving my enemy may help me to understand some of my errors that have caused a conflict in the relationship. As a result, I am able to change my behavior to make me more accurately reflect the righteousness and justice of Christ.

Change Our Enemies

Loving our enemies can also change our enemies. I once heard a story of some parents who took their children on an excursion. A man who was dirty and shabbily dressed approached them. The family greeted the man and invited him to share their meal. The man looked surprised, but took a plate and ate. When he had finished, he got up to leave. After taking a few steps away, he turned back to the family, this time with a large knife in his hands. He told the family, "When I came to you earlier, I was going to rob you. However, you were so nice to me, greeting me and offering me your food, that I could not rob you." Then the man turned and ran away.

There is a Jewish proverb that says, "Who is the strongest of the warriors? He who turns one who hates him into one who loves him." How do we turn those who hate us into those who love us? Through love. Indeed, this is the heart of the Christianity: we used to be enemies of God because of the filth of our sin and disobedience. However, God loved us so much that he made himself into the nothingness of a human being and peacefully lived among his enemies for 33 years. Then Jesus suffered a cruel death for the sole purpose of changing his enemies into his friends and brothers. The heart of the gospel is a love that has the power to change a person from a friend into an enemy.

Martin Luther King, Junior said, "[Another reason] why we should love our enemies is that love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power."

When we love our enemies, we show them a different way of life: one filled with love, compassion, truth, peace, goodness, and joy. People who are filled with malice and hate expect other people to also treat them with malice and hate. However, when we respond to their actions with love and kindness, they will be puzzled and wonder what it was that enabled us to respond with love. Thus, loving our enemies may enable the other person to change and become a person filled with love and forgiveness.

Sons and Daughters of the Most High

Jesus gave a final reason for his command to love our enemies: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that...But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your father is merciful” (Luke 6:32-36). Thus, we are to love our enemies so that we will be sons and daughters of the Most High God, who also loved his enemies. Loving our enemies makes us more like Christ, who died for his enemies.

God told the Israelites, “I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river” (Isaiah 48:17b-18a). May we have the courage and the wisdom to follow all of Jesus’ commands. May God help us to love our enemies in order to change ourselves, change our relationships, and change our world.

Dr. Korb is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Jos. This article appeared in *Lighthouse* magazine.