

Love Your Enemies

By David Wright

A significant segment of the Sermon on the Mount contrasts the demands of the Law with the Lord's expectations for his disciples (Matt. 5:21-48). As Jesus modifies or replaces several OT commandments, he first reminds his disciples of what has long been understood and then declares: "But I say to you ..." (vs. 21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). The last item in his list of changes may be the most challenging. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

While the OT plainly says, "You shall love your neighbor" (Lev. 19:18), there is no corresponding command to hate your enemy. The understanding that such hatred is acceptable derives from passages such as Psalm 139. David's passion for the Lord leads him to despise people who oppose God: "Do I not hate them that hate thee, O Lord? And do I not loathe them that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies" (vs. 21-22).

Wishing for the downfall of our adversaries is certainly human nature, but Jesus calls us to a higher standard. We must follow not the desires of the flesh but the will of the Father. Jesus demands that we love our enemies and "pray for those who persecute" us so that we may be sons of the "Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:44-45). Anyone who accepts the Lord's challenge discovers a peace of mind that the bitter in spirit may never know.

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