**20th February 2022**



**Call to worship**

We are called to love our enemies.
But this is difficult.
Let us invite God to direct our thoughts and our prayers.
Let us ask God to move in our hearts and minds.
Let us ask God to teach and show us
what it means to love our enemies.
Let us worship him.



**A gathering prayer**

Father, we thank you that we are loved by you; no matter what.
You call us to let your love flow through us to other people –
including those who may have hurt us.
Give us the grace and compassion to do this,
and give us understanding as we explore this today.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of thanksgiving for children**

Lord Jesus,
thank you that you showed us
it is possible to love our enemies.
**Amen.**



**A prayer for forgiveness for children**

Loving God,
sometimes it’s hard to forgive others;
sometimes it’s hard to move on from difficult situations;
sometimes it’s easier to stay angry or cross.
But you forgive us,
so help us to forgive others.



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Father, we confess that we nurture enmity
and hold grudges against those we think of as enemies.
They are usually in the wrong, and we are probably in the right.
But we confess, Lord, that sometimes we are equally to blame,
or at least not entirely innocent.
No matter who started it, or how it began,
perhaps a swift word of reconciliation,
or a genuine attempt to understand, to sort things out,
would have nipped matters in the bud.
Sometimes we know that life is not so simple;
help us to know what to do, how to respond.
For sometimes we should turn the other cheek,
sometimes we should keep things in check,
sometimes we should simply turn and walk away for our own good.
We confess that the complexities of life confuse us;
please help us understand what you would have us do.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, no matter what we have done, you forgive us;
and no matter what ‘they’ have done,
and whoever ‘they’ are, you forgive them too.
You forgive our enemies even when we don’t,
and you forgive us even when we don’t deserve it.
Thanks be to you, all-forgiving God.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Father, we thank you for showing us a better way to live.
When someone wrongs us, our first thought is to take revenge,
to give as good as we got.
But you teach us to take pause for thought,
and by so doing, perhaps make ‘them’ do likewise.
We praise you, God, for your wisdom,
imparted to us through your Son, Jesus Christ,
and revealed to us by the Holy Spirit –
to whom be all thanks and praise, now and for ever.
**Amen.**



**Luke 6.27-38**

We too often think of love as warm feelings. We have just had the romantic day of the year – Valentine’s Day when love was all around us. Today, we are challenged to love sacrificially - and even to love our enemies! Luke 6:27.

As [tensions continue on the border between Ukraine and Russia](https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2022/feb/16/ukraine-russia-latest-news-live-putin-biden-kyiv-russian-invasion-threat), world leaders try to work for diplomatic solutions and a way of settling the situation that provides peace and stability.

There may be a difficult person at work, perhaps your boss who is overbearing, maybe a bit of a bully – How do you love them?

You may have been the victim of an injustice, you may have been hurt by someone, someone may have abused you. Should you love your enemy?

Jesus’ call to discipleship is never easy. This section of the ‘Sermon on the Plain’ is among the toughest and most disconcerting things Jesus has to say to us.

‘Love your enemies’ (v.27) can strike us as such a perverse instruction that we want to do a double-take. Shouldn’t we hate our enemies? Or, at the very least, want vengeance or, if they’ve hurt us, justice?

Perhaps one fruitful way to consider how one might take Jesus’ words seriously without attempting to wish them away, is to consider what is covered by the concept of love. We live in an era where love is, much of the time, understood as an emotion or as something that exists firstly in our heads and hearts. It entails being well or affectionately disposed towards another.

Jesus’ context had a stronger relational, public and practical conception of love. Love was, in part, about being in relationship together in community. To love one’s enemies entails acknowledging that they remain part of the community; that they are not other or beyond the pale; that somehow, and at some level, the people of God are diminished without them. It leaves room, however tenuously, for God – in us and in them – to restore and remake the community. For us that might seem impossible, but nothing is impossible in God.

Henri Nouwen often wrote about the transformatory work of love: “That is our vocation: to convert the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced”.

So Jesus says:

*If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.****30****Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.****31****Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

Are we being asked to be doormats? Let the aggressor walk all over us? We just have to be loving and nice?

In Matthew’s version of this teaching, in the Sermon on the Mount Matthew 5.38-48 it says resist not the evil person. King James’s scholars decided to translate the Greek word antistenai as ‘resist not’. The king didn’t want his subjects objecting to his unjust policies. Submission is the will of God. And most modern translations have meekly followed in that path and given the impression that people of faith should be passive in the face of aggression.

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Walter Wink, Professor of Biblical interpretation in New York seminary[[1]](#endnote-1), suggests that a proper translation would have been don’t strike back at evil in kind. Don’t retaliate against violence with violence. Jesus was no less committed to opposing evil than the anti-Roman resistance fighters. The only difference was over the means used.

How should one fight evil?

There are three general responses to evil.

Fight: violent opposition.

Flight – passivity and submission.

And the third way advocated by Jesus – non-violence that seeks to love the enemy into change.

And Jesus gives two examples here of making a stand in a non-violent way.

First of all, ‘turning the other cheek’ – understanding it not to mean take the insult, be a doormat but instead - being an act of resistance- not being dismissed as an inferior- forcing your oppressor to acknowledge your humanity.

Mohandas K Gandhi, the ‘little man’ became the catalyst for the liberation of oppressed people on three continents: south Africa, where he started his career as a lawyer, India, where he was the key leader in their independence from the British empire, and his inspiration for Revd Dr Martin Luther king and the campaign to abolish racist laws in the southern states of the United States.

Gandhi found inspiration for his stand not from his Hindu faith but from the teachings of Jesus. Yet in spite of this he never introduced himself as a Christian. Mahatma (the Great Soul) as he came to be known, saw Christians as unwilling to truly follow Jesus’ teaching and example.

In the Oscar winning film of his life there is a scene where a young Christian Minister Rev Charlie Andrews hears what Gandhi is doing in South Africa and goes there to speak with him. Within minutes of their first meeting Andrews comes face to face with the hatred and abuse that Gandhi and all people of colour had to put up with every day.

A gang of burly white South Africans men start shouting abuse at Gandhi and Andrews as they walk down the street. Andrews is rather concerned about the very real possibility of being attacked and suggests that perhaps he and Gandhi turn around. But these men will not intimidate Gandhi.

‘Doesn’t the New Testament say, ‘if your enemy strikes you on the right cheek, offer him your left?’

Andrews looks rather bemused by Gandhi’s sudden desire to quote Bible verses. ‘I think perhaps the phrase was used metaphorically’ he replies.

‘I am not so sure’, Gandhi counters. ‘I have thought about it a great deal, and I suspect Jesus meant that you must show courage. Be willing to take a blow, several blows to show you will not strike back nor will you be turned aside. And when you do that, it calls on something in human nature, something that makes his hatred for you decrease and his respect increase. I think Jesus grasped that, and I have seen it at work’.

It is important to remember who Jesus’ audience is. His listeners were not those who use force or who impose forced labour or initiate lawsuits but those who are their victims: if anyone hits you …if anyone sues you… if anyone forces you to go one mile. The people Jesus was talking to were the ones who were subjected to these indignities, forced to stifle their inner outrage at their dehumanizing treatment.

Let’s look at this second example. Someone is being sued for their shirt – their inner garment. Only the poorest of the poor would have nothing but an outer garment or cloak to give as collateral for a loan. Jewish law of Jesus’ day strictly required its return every evening at sunset, for that was all the poor had in which to sleep.

The situation to which Jesus alludes is one with which all his hearers would have been all too familiar: the poor debtor has sunk ever deeper into poverty, the debt cannot be repaid, and his creditor has hauled him into court to try to seize his property by legal means.

Indebtedness was a serious social problem in first century Palestine, as much as it is today. Jesus’ parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. The situation was not always a natural calamity that had overtaken the incompetent. It was the direct consequence of Roman imperial policy. Emperors taxed the wealthy ruthlessly to fund their wars. The wealthy then hit the peasants hard. Roman policy allowed exploitation to take place. It is in this context that Jesus speaks. His hearers share a hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their lands and goods and finally even the cloak they wear.

Why then does Jesus counsel them to give over their cloak as well as their shirt? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of court stark naked!

Nakedness was taboo in Judaism and shame fell not on the naked party, but on the person viewing or causing one’s nakedness. The creditor is embarrassed and ashamed. They are revealed not to be a respectable moneylender but a party in the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness and destitution. This unmasking is not simply to shame the creditor but to offer perhaps the first chance in their life to see the harm their practices can cause and to repent. Far from collaborating in injustice, the poor man has used the law to make an exploitative law a laughing stock.

Jesus is in effect sponsoring clowning. Lampooning and ridiculing what is unjust.

There was a story about the apartheid regime in South Africa where the authorities had sought for a long time to destroy a particular shantytown. One day after most of the men and women had left for work the army arrived. They announced that the few women there had five minutes to gather their things and then bulldozers would commence work. The women, perhaps sensing the prudery of the farm boys who largely made up the army, stood in front of the bulldozers and stripped off all their clothes. The army fled.

In both situations Jesus is trying to help those who are engaged in oppressive acts to repent by being made embarrassed and uncomfortable by their actions.

St Paul catches the same principle when he writes in Romans 12

*‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
    if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’[*[*e*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=romans+12&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28266e)*]*

***21****Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

There is always the danger of using such tactics for revenge and humiliation. Or, the uncompromising love of Jesus being sentimentalised and just seen as being nice to someone. This was loving confrontation that sought to free the oppressed from passivity and submission - and the oppressor from sin.

Jesus’ way was to assert your own humanity and dignity as a person. Meet force with ridicule or humour. Break the cycle of humiliation. Refuse to submit or accept the inferior position. Expose the injustice and shame the oppressor.

Walter Wink gives some practical examples. A mother in one of his workshops told a story that deals with the perennial problem of bullying. Her son was the smallest in the class, and he was afflicted with chronic sinusitis. On the school bus there was a bully who was terrorizing all the kids. Finally, one day the boy had had it with the bully. He blew his nose into his right hand, and then walked toward the bully, extending his hand, and saying, ‘I’ve always wanted to shake the hand of a bully’. The bully began to back up to the back of the bus, where he meekly sat down and never bothered anyone on that bus again, because that nose was always at the ready. The boy used his weakness as his strength. He took the momentum of evil and used it to throw his opponent.

The nurses in a hospital in the States were tired of being browbeaten and corrected in front of patients and generally made to feel inferior and worthless by some of the doctors on the staff. The nurses put their heads together and came up with a plan. They went to a sympathetic administrator who set up a pink alert which would be transmitted over the intercom the next time a doctor started abusing a nurse. From all over the hospital nurses who were free converged on the scene surrounded the doctor holding hands waiting for the doctor to make the first move. Finally, the doctor would acquiesce in their lesson.

Many a woman has been counselled, on the strength of this passage to ‘turn the other cheek’ – the Christian thing is to put up with the violence or the humiliation of an abusive partner.

What she needs, in the spirit of Jesus’ words, is to find a way to restore her own dignity and end the vicious circle of humiliation, guilt and bruising. She needs to assert some control in the situation and force her partner to regard her as an equal or get out of the relationship altogether. The victim needs to recover her self-worth and seize the initiative from her oppressor. And he needs to be helped to overcome his violence and abuse. The most loving thing she could do, might be to have him arrested.

These examples are only little sketches, like the cartoons that Jesus gave – to give us the idea. Whatever situation we’re in – abusive partners, bullying bosses, and humiliation in the workplace or in a social environment – we need to think it through ourselves. What would it mean to reflect God’s generous love despite the pressure and provocation, despite your own anger and frustration? To love even your enemies.

Impossible? Well maybe at one level. But again, Jesus’ teaching isn’t just good advice, its good news. Jesus did it all himself and opened up the new way of being human so that all who follow him can discover it. When they mocked him, he didn’t respond. When they challenged him he told quizzical stories making them to think differently. When they struck him, he didn’t strike back. When they nailed him to a cross he prayed for them. Christ asks nothing from his followers that he hasn’t already faced himself. And within his life to discover the love of God that the world needs to know so badly.

**Prayers of intercession**

Loving Lord, the people of old looked to you to rescue them from Roman oppression. But instead of being the conquering heroic messiah they expected, you were, and are, The Messiah like no other: conqueror of the enemies of sin and death through the cross with forgiveness and immeasurable love.

We pray for your church. For all people under oppression today because of their faith.  For Christians being persecuted and imprisoned in China and elsewhere around the world.

We pray for all around the world living amid conflict; the innocent victims fearing for their survival. We pray also for those who seek to conquer others. We think particularly of the growing situation between Russia and Ukraine. And pray for those involved in talks to prevent invasion. We pray for the British citizens advised to leave their jobs and homes there.

**Loving Lord, release Christians from captivity. Soften the hearts of the persecutors. Overcome the enemy with your love. Bring peace and unity. Lord, fill all with the measure of your love.**

Lord, we pray for people at war with enemies within. We pray for people today fighting inner turmoil.  Those riddled with self-loathing, doubts or regrets. Those struggling with anger issues. We pray for others fuelled by the enemies of drink, gambling, drugs.

**Loving Lord, release all who suffer, all who are stuck fast in addiction. And strengthen those who fight to remain free of such enemies. Lord, fill all with the measure of your love.**

Lord, we pray for all those in the clutches of debt and all those fearing the spiralling cost of living. We pray for our communities as shops and other amenities struggle to survive.

We pray for the sick. For those who have been shielding and are worrying about the end to covid restrictions.

**Loving Lord, release all from their worries and fears. Heal, strengthen and provide. Lord, fill all with the measure of your love.**

**Loving Lord, you bid us love one another; the good and the bad. Joseph did not seek revenge on his brothers but forgave them for doing him wrong. We pray for those who have wronged us. May we measure with love not judgement. Lord, fill all with the measure of your love.**

**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Lord, thank you that we are loved and forgiven by you.
We know it is hard to love those who have hurt us.
Give us your strength.
Help us to love our enemies.
Help us to do good to those who hate and hurt us.
And help us to know when we have hurt others,
and to repent, and to seek only to do good,
in Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

1. Walter Wink, Jesus and Non-Violence: A Third Way, Fortress Press 2003 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)