

**SERMON: 10 November 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper
“Jesus’ Teaching on Revenge and Loving Enemies”
(Psalm 20 and Matthew 5:38-48)**

You have heard that it has been said, you shall love your neighbour, and you shall hate your enemy; but I say to you: love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.

(Matthew 5:43)

I think there can be no doubt that the sermon on the mount is the central and most famous section of Jesus’ manifesto for real change. This is the core ethic of Christianity in action.

Never mind the empty promises of politicians, I vote Jesus for Prime Minister.

If Adolf Hitler had really known Jesus, and walked in his footsteps, our world would be in a very different place today.

So what does it mean to love your enemy? The word used for love in the Greek is agape. Agape describes a love which is different from the kind of love we experience in our families, or in our intimate relationships or the love between close friends. It’s not the sort of love that happens when we fall in love with someone.

[SLIDE] Agape is what William Barclay defined as ‘unconquerable benevolence’ and ‘invincible goodwill’. If we regard a person with agape, it means that no matter what that person does to us, no matter how he treats us, no matter if he insults us or injures us or grieves us, we will never allow any bitterness against him to invade our hearts, but will regard him with that unconquerable benevolence and goodwill which will seek nothing but his highest good.

It is to get rid of all thoughts of resentment or retaliation; letting go of any intention to get our own back or to hold a grudge.

[SLIDE] As Jesus said, “when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against” (Mark 11:25).

[SLIDE] Paul’s advised the Roman Christians, Never hold a grudge or try to get even, but plan your life around the noblest way to benefit others. Do your best to live as everybody’s friend. (Romans 12:17)

Agape love is often not a love which comes from our heart. It’s usually a conscious decision of the will. We have to will ourselves to love our enemy. It won’t come naturally until it becomes a habit; and that is the same as saying until we become more like Jesus.

I think a big barrier to this kind of loving is a barrier which we might call offence. How easily we can be offended.

According to William Barclay, “Churches are tragically full of people (who take offence), officials whose territory has been invaded, office bearers who have not been accorded their proper place, courts which do business with a manual of practice and procedure on the table all the time, lest anyone’s rights should be invaded”.

We must be let go of any rights when it comes to following Jesus and instead think about our duty and privilege to love and to serve. We must be slow to take offence and slow to give offence; then we’ll find agape easier to practise.

Jesus proves that its possible for people to learn to love enemies. Indeed our true essence as human beings is that we will love our enemies because Jesus has shown us what we truly are. Our true selves are hidden with Christ in God. So we have it in us to love with agape.

Say to yourself, my core essence is that I can love my enemies. I can overcome my natural instinct for revenge and hatred and instead learn to love.

Agape is a determination of the mind. It is the power to love those whom we do not like and who may not like us. It is the power of Christ at work in us and through us.

Now please hear me. I'm not saying that if someone has done me wrong that they should not be punished for their wrong doing. But any punishment must be restorative justice and not satisfy a thirst for revenge on my part.

Actually, this kind of love, agape, is the kind of love Jesus modelled in every relationship and in turn expects us to model in every relationship; so that we practise unconquerable benevolence and invincible goodwill with our partners, in our families, in our workplaces and our community life.

And its only because Christ lives in our hearts through faith that we're going to be able to practise agape. The love that lays down its life only to rise again is the love that is ours in Christ.

Sometimes agape will drive us to pray for our enemies. It might be so raw and difficult that the only option we have is to bring the relationship before God in prayer, knowing that when we do so, something will happen, either he will change or I will change.

[SLIDE] To quote William Barclay again, "the surest way of killing bitterness is to pray for the man we are tempted to hate".

When we practise agape, this unconquerable benevolence and invincible goodwill, we best reflect the nature of God.

This is what drives us to do it - that we might become like God in nature.

[SLIDE] As Jesus said, "you must be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

God is benevolent. He makes the sun to rise on the good and the evil, he sends rain on the just and the unjust.

We must be people of unconquerable benevolence and invincible goodwill because God is the God of unconquerable benevolence and invincible goodwill.

God made us in God's image. We must then reflect that image. We must be like him.

This is our destiny - to become perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Again, the Greek word here for perfect is not quite how we think of being perfect. It's the word *teleios*, and it's used when something completes the course or fulfills the purpose for which it was created.

Human beings are made to be perfect like this; to be complete channels of unconquerable benevolence and invincible goodwill. That is our destiny, our purpose, to be like God in seeking the highest good for every man, woman and child; forgiving as God forgives and loving as God loves.

And remember, agape love is a conscious decision of the mind.

As Richard Rohr has put it,

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"We must deliberately choose to be instruments of peace—first of all in our minds and hearts God is not "in" heaven nearly as much as God is the force field that allows us to create heaven through our intentions and actions".

We can choose to move things along in the direction of more violence and hatred or we can move things in the direction of healing and wholeness every time we choose to love.

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Etty Hillesum was another young Dutch woman imprisoned in Nazi Germany and was killed in Auschwitz. From there she wrote these words,

"Each of us must turn inwards and destroy in [ourselves] all that [we think we] ought to destroy in others. And remember that every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable."

[Etty Hillesum, diary entry (September 23, 1942), *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943*, trans. Arno Pomerans (Pantheon Books: 1983)]

Every atom of hate inside us makes our world more and more inhospitable. Let's not harbour hatred.

Jesus has shown us that God speaks in love and that God speaks in and through our lives. May we listen always to that voice of love and let the voice of God be seen and heard until that day when God's kingdom is made perfect and the peace we all long for becomes a reality for all people.