



The Love Challenge

By

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Jesus has given each of us a challenge:

- Love God
- Love Others

Sounds easy enough, but is it?

I think it's easy to love someone you already love, but what about people you don't love? What about people who don't love you? What about people who are mean to you and try to hurt you? What about people who hate you because of what you believe? Does Jesus say we have to love them, too?

Short answer. Yes. We do.

Valentine's Day

The reason I wanted to share some thoughts about *love* with you on Valentine's Day is because, well, you know, we're thinking about people we love. It's fun to give someone we love a special card and maybe candy and flowers on Valentine's Day. A lot of us learned how to do that when we were children. I remember giving a card to my Mom each year and handing out handmade cards and little heart candies to fellow students in elementary school. Parents and teachers taught us the importance of showing people we love that we love them.

Something that's harder to do is show people we don't love that we love them. Does that sound weird? Maybe even hypocritical? How can we show people we *don't* love that we *do* love them since we *don't* love them?

That's where God can help us. He teaches us how to love people we don't love and who don't love us without being hypocritical. In other words, God shows us how to love all people, even our enemies.

Love Your Enemies

What kind of Valentine's Day card would you give someone you don't love or who doesn't love you? What if they are an enemy? Remember, you can't lie about loving them. You really have to love them before giving them a card.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” MATTHEW 5:43-48

You probably recognize this from the famous *Sermon on the Mount* that Jesus preached in Galilee. He certainly got people's attention with what He said in that sermon. The Jewish people understood things differently because of the way they had been taught by religious leaders for centuries. Jesus came to put things right by telling them the truth.

The truth is that only God is perfect (complete), so if we're going to be perfect and *sons* of our Father in Heaven, we'll have to get His help. How does God help us learn how to love everyone? He shows us.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” JOHN 3:16

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” ROMANS 5:8

God showed how much He loves us by sending Jesus, His one and only Son, to die for us. Before you say something like, “Well, of course He would do that because I’m so easy to love,” read this

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“For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” ROMANS 5:10

“And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled.” COLOSSIANS 1:21

Yes, each one of us was once alienated from God and an enemies in our mind by wicked works. What did God do? He loved us and sent Jesus so that we could be reconciled to Him. God is no hypocrite or liar. When God said He “so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,” He was telling the truth. God really loved us, even though we were His enemies and alienated from Him by wicked works. Why would God love us? Simple. Because He does. God loves. He is love and His love is perfect.

Why Are You Telling Me This?

You may wonder why I'm telling you this on Valentine's Day. I'm telling you this because we're all going to need to remember the importance of loving our enemies this year and the next year and the year after that.

When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, He was talking to an occupied people. The Jews in Israel were ruled over by the Roman Empire and by Hebrew legalists who cared more for themselves than the people they were supposed to guide and protect. Occupied people know about enemies. Friends don't occupy friends. Enemies do that.

Millions of Christians around the world today live in nations where they are the minority. They understand what Jesus meant when He said, "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." Talk with a Christian who lives in a country where people hate them because of what they believe and ask them what they think of what Jesus taught about loving your enemies. It can be challenging.

Christians in the United States have been blessed as a majority group for many years, but things are changing quickly. The day is fast approaching when the words Jesus spoke about loving your enemies will take on a much deeper and more urgent meaning. We will have enemies who want to persecute us, even hurt us, and what Jesus said will still be true – *love your enemies*. That will become our challenge.

Jesus didn't say those words almost two-thousand years ago to frighten people. They were already an occupied people who were hated by their occupiers and even their own religious leaders. He said those words to challenge and encourage them in the face of hate. I'm following His lead. All of us need to think about what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount as more than just words spoken centuries ago in a land far, far away. What Jesus said then is true now and will continue to be true in the future.

So, how do we love our enemies? I think of it as God loving them through us. It's tough to really love people who hate you and want to harm you. We need to call on a power greater than ourselves to do that and God's love is that power.

We become new people when God saves us. Paul wrote that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Part of the *newness* we have in Christ is His ability to love the unlovely, to love those who hate us, to love our enemies.

When we look at the full context of Paul’s comments in 2 Corinthians 5, we are reminded that God has given us the *ministry of reconciliation*, “that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.” Loving our enemies is an important part of our ‘ministry of reconciliation’. Whatever happens to us in the coming days, we need to love God and others, and that includes our enemies. If you’re not sure how to do that, keep reading your Bible. Ask God to give you wisdom and courage as you face tough challenges. He will.

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