



A Spiritual Encouragement Message May 15, 2020

“AGAPE” YOUR ENEMIES

Let's return for a few moments to the situation that faced the Jews as they were taken captive for 70 years by their arch-enemies...Babylon. Their problem was not the same as the problem we face in the midst of this pandemic, but there are some similarities. Their enemy was Babylon, our enemy today is this stay-at home order, the conspiracies theories we all have, and the longer all this continues, our enemies may become each other. So lets talk about enemies for a few moments.

Where Do My Enemies Come From?

On a human level, there are many answers to that question. Enemies most often come from those closest to us. Sometimes people turn against us because of foolish things we do. Other times we may suffer at the hands of someone against whom we have done no wrong. People may disparage us because of our appearance, our background, our personal beliefs, our ethnic origin, our skin color, our position in life, our money (or lack thereof), or for a million other reasons. They may think we are boring, empty, trivial, a bother to them and an impediment to their career. They may be prejudiced against us for no good reason. Perhaps they dislike us because we have succeeded where they failed. Who knows? Enemies rarely explain themselves. So where do your enemies come from? Just look around you...they are everywhere.

Who Are My Enemies?

In the broadest sense, an enemy is anyone who turns against me. The dictionary defines an enemy as “one who feels hatred toward, intends injury to, or opposes the interests of another.” It's important as we think about this that we not restrict the term “enemy” to people like China or Russia. My personal enemies tend to be much closer to home. In fact, home is the first place to look for your enemies. In the context of the end of the Jewish economy, Jesus said, “A man's enemies will be the members of his own household” (Matthew 10:36). In that very passage he specified three very close

relationships that go sour:

A father and his son,

A mother and her daughter,

A mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law.

We can easily extrapolate from that list to other close relationships, including parent-child, husband-wife, and on out to grandparents, uncles, aunts, and then to various distant relatives. It certainly includes people at work and those who attend church with us. The enemies we are told to love usually are not people in Iraq or North Korea. Most of us will never visit those two countries. But we do have to go home every day to face people who may or may not be glad to see us. Every week we work with people who may dislike us. Unfortunately, we may even come to church services and see people we would rather not see. If the teachings of Jesus are going to work, they must work first in the relationships closest to us. Inside every family, spiritual or physical, there are going to be some people who rub us the wrong way. That's why your closest friends, your strongest supporters, and your biggest critics will probably all come from your own flesh and blood. You have to learn to deal with the people closest to you before you can impact the world around you. Let me be more specific:

Your children could be your enemies.

Your husband could be your enemy.

Your wife could be your enemy.

Your parents could be your enemies.

Your brethren could be your enemies.

Certainly your ex-wife or your ex-husband could be your enemy. It isn't just people "out there" somewhere—nameless, faceless, anonymous evil people who are our enemies. Sooner or later people we love will hurt us deeply and at that point, and for at least that moment, they have become our enemies. And if we are honest enough to admit it, we have become their enemies too. Something like that had happened to the Jews in exile. They hated the Babylonians with a fierce hatred.

Consider the final words of Psalm 137. "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (vv. 8-9).

Ever prayed like that? "Lord, may their babies be dashed against the rocks." There is no way to soften those words or to dim the anger they express. The Jewish exiles are asking God to send someone to

invade Babylon, to do to them as they had done to Jerusalem, and then to take their babies and dash them against the rocks. Maybe we have not prayed about babies concerning our enemies, but how about wishing they fail, or wishing something bad would happen to them. We can actually find a metrical version of Psalm 137 in the “New Psalter” of 1696. The last two verses read like this:

Proud Babel's daughter, doomed to be
of grief and woe the wretched prey;
Blessed is the man who shall to thee
the wrongs thou lay'st on us repay.
Thrice blessed, who with just rage possessed,
and deaf to all the parents' moans,
Shall snatch thy infants from the breast,
and dash their heads against the stones.

It's hard to imagine closing a worship service this way. Yet we can't deny that Psalm 137 is part of the inspired text of the Bible. Isaiah 13 contains a prophecy of God's judgment against Babylon. Verses 15-18 explain how God answered the prayer of Psalm 137: “Whoever is found will be thrust through, and whoever is caught will fall by the sword. Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished.

Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold. Their bows will slaughter the young men; they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children.”

Even though the prayer of Psalm 137 seems extreme, God answered it literally, and he did it by using one pagan kingdom (the Medes) to judge another pagan kingdom (the Babylonians).

It's not as if we have to choose between loving our enemies and hoping they are someday punished. If we do our part (loving them), God can certainly take care of judging them. And in the meantime, we will be blessed if we work for the prosperity of our enemies and pray for God's blessings upon them. If that sounds confusing, then just remember this:

If we remain bitter, we cannot get better.

If we try to get even with those who hurt us, we are mostly hurting ourselves.

If we try to punish our enemies, we are usurping God's authority.

But if we love them and bless them and pray for them, things will go better for us and for them. And

we can then sleep well at night, knowing that if they need punishment, God can take care of it in his own time and in his own way. That's the real meaning of Jeremiah 29:7. This pandemic has become our enemy... the situations we face may cause us to hate those who imposed them upon us.

Of course, it is easier to talk about this abstractly. It is much harder to love our enemies on a daily basis. We are to love those who spitefully use us and abuse us and victimize us again and again. It's not easy to do this in any case, but it is much harder to love when we feel deeply and repeatedly violated and our trust has been destroyed. Yet the command remains: "Love your enemies" (Luke 6:27). We cannot escape it. This is a key part of our own spiritual journey from bitterness to forgiveness to freedom.

The application of this is difficult, but the lesson is plain... do not hold grudges against with whom we disagree. Do not let circumstances dictate our feelings for others. "Agape" your enemies.

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