

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES – IT’LL DRIVE ‘EM CRAZY

Luke 6:27-38

Comedian George Burns was being given a big dinner (actually a “roast”) in honor of his 95th birthday. The dais was loaded with talent and one of the first speakers was Irving Brecher who, among other things, was the creator/writer of the popular 1950’s TV show, “The Life of Riley”. Summing up his tribute to Burns, Brecher concluded: “What is so unusual about our guest of honor this evening is that in a profession that is so frenetically competitive, George Burns does not have a single enemy. He outlived them all.”

One of humorist James Thurber’s favorite stories concerns his grandfather who fought as many as a dozen Indians bare-handed (to hear him tell it) and vanquished them all. On his deathbed, he was asked by his minister, “Have you forgiven all your enemies?” “Haven’t got any,” said the old man. “Remarkable,” the minister responded, “but how did a red-blooded two-fisted old fighter like you go through life without making any enemies?” Thurber’s grandfather explained casually, “I shot ‘em.”

Did you happen to see the same bumper sticker I saw when I drove down Liberty Avenue one day. It said, “Love Your Enemies – It’ll Drive ‘Em Crazy”.

Maybe you’ve guessed by now: Today’s sermon is about how to deal with your enemies.

Let’s tackle that issue by first asking the question, “Who are my enemies?” Now, maybe you’ll answer that question by saying, “I don’t have any. I love everybody and everybody loves me.” Or, maybe you’re like 6-year old Jennifer who wrote to her pastor:

**“Dear Pastor,
I heard you say to love our enemies. I am only six and don’t have any yet. I hope to have some by the time I’m seven.”
Love, Jennifer”**

Let's be really honest now. And maybe let's stretch our view of who an enemy really is. Could someone in your family be an enemy? Son-In-Law? Perhaps even a daughter or a parent? Or maybe someone with whom you work? Maybe it's someone you're in competition with.

In the early days of electric lights in this country, Thomas Edison was promoting DC current, the kind you find in batteries. And George Westinghouse was promoting AC current, the kind that today comes through electrical lines. As homes were being wired for electricity, Westinghouse's AC current was winning out. Edison, hoping to undermine the popularity of Westinghouse's AC current, hit upon a plan. Edison had been asked by a member of the New York State commission on capital punishment to help them come up with an alternative form of execution to the customary hanging. Tying his two problems together, Edison invented the modern electric chair – using Westinghouse's AC current. When names were suggested for this type of execution such words as “electricide” were put forward. Edison, however, was adamant. A genius he was, but not a very nice one. He wanted them to say that the condemned criminal had been “Westinghoused”!

Competitors may become enemies. Not just in business but within the family. Brothers compete, sisters compete, spouses compete. Friends compete. Neighbors compete. Nothing wrong with that. But feelings can be rubbed raw. Resentment can build. Soon a neighbor is secretly glad to see another neighbor's misfortune. Your enemy could be a “friend” who is tempting you to do wrong. Your enemy may be someone who has hurt you in the past and that hurt just will not go away. Your enemy could be someone you simply disagree with strongly – even someone in the church – and that disagreement has caused a barrier to be erected between the two of you. *Who is your enemy?* That's the first question for the morning.

The second is this: *How is your enemy affecting you spiritually?*

There are at least three ways you can respond to an enemy. First of all, you can *retaliate*. You may remember the old fable about a man who was informed by his doctor that he had rabies. The man had waited so long that the doctor said nothing could be done about his condition. After telling the sad news, the doctor left. Later he stopped back to

check on the patient who was writing something on a piece of paper. “Are you writing a will?” the doctor asked. “No,” said the man, “I’m making a list of all the people I’m going to bite!”

Newspapers carry stories all the time about people who have a grievance against someone else and try to settle that grievance through retaliation.

Spiritually, retaliation is deadly. There was a television movie that pointed out just how deadly it is. It was about a young man who had a love-hate relationship with his father. He was trying desperately to hurt his dad in a business deal. When his stepmother learned of it and chastised him, he responded, “I wanted to beat him just once.” His mother replied, “You have not beaten him; you have become him.”

And it really can work that way. Retaliation can do permanent damage not only to our enemy but to ourselves as well. We can become our enemy, twisted and evil. That’s one way of dealing with an enemy – retaliate.

A second not-so-good way of dealing with an enemy is to do nothing overtly, but secretly, to *harbor resentment* toward that person. I suspect that, among Christians, that’s the most common way of dealing with enemies. We are nice people. We wouldn’t openly harm anyone: but boy, can we harbor a grudge. The problem with holding onto those negative feelings toward someone is, again, what those feelings do to us, both physically and spiritually.

In 1844, Captain Robert Stockton brought his ship, the Princeton, to Washington to display her before government officials and leading social figures. While the ship was a technological marvel and her firepower was vast, Stockton was really proudest of one particular gun. That gun, called the Peacemaker, was the biggest and heaviest naval cannon then in existence. It weighed 13 ½ tons and fired cannon balls that were a foot in diameter and weighed 225 pounds. The gun could shoot a cannon ball several miles with a normal 25-pound charge of gunpowder, and the gun had been tested with up to a 50-pound charge. What power!

During the celebrations on the Princeton, Stockton fired his gun repeatedly for a crowd made up of the President, his cabinet, influential senators, and other dignitaries. Later, while festivities were in full swing below, Stockton was summoned back to the deck to fire the gun one more time. President Tyler also started back to the deck, but then stayed below to hear his son-in-law finish a song. When Stockton did fire the gun, it exploded – killing 2 members of the President’s cabinet and a number of other influential men. Had the explosion occurred at any earlier point, the gun probably would have removed the better part of the US Government. The gun that was to be a destructive terror to an enemy proved to be an explosive terror to friends. *Retaliation* and *resentment* are both explosive terrors to the one carrying or employing them.

Jesus says there is a third way to deal with enemies – we can love them. Sometimes, for our own good, that is the only reasonable way to deal with our enemies.

When Kenneth Godfrey of Locust Grove, Georgia, was eighteen years old, his father died. All of his adult life his father had owned and operated a service station and people purchased items on credit. After his father died, he and his mother tried to run the service station. His mother opened the station every morning and after school Kenneth went down and worked until closing time. After a while Kenneth began to attend to a large file of debts that had accumulated through the years. Since his father had died, people were refusing to pay what they owed. It was as if they thought the father’s death had cancelled their debt. This bothered Kenneth. Statements were sent and the statements were ignored. After a year and a half Kenneth and his mother sold the service station and got out of the business. However, they kept a file of the debts, in hopes that those who owed them would someday pay. Another year went by.

One Sunday afternoon Kenneth’s mother walked into the room with that file of debts in her hand and announced, “Son there’s something that is eating at me about these debts and I have decided to do something about them.”

Kenneth thought, at last we are going to get a lawyer. He asked his mother, “What are you going to do?”

She said, “I’m going to forgive them.”

“How are you going to do that?” Kenneth asked.

She said, “Follow me and I’ll show you.”

They went out into the backyard and gathered some sticks and made a fire on an old cookout grill. Then she opened the file of debts; she took one out, read the name out-loud and tore the debt in half. Then she said, “I forgive you,” and dropped it into the fire. She looked at Kenneth and asked, “Son, would you want to try it?”

Kenneth said, “I don’t think I can.”

His mother said, ‘Son, you don’t have a choice about it, if you want to be forgiven, you must forgive them.’ Kenneth stood there in silence watching her burning those debts. Finally, he slowly reached into the file. He got out a debt, read the name out loud, tore it up and dropped it into the fire. It took a good thirty minutes to complete the task, but when it was finished it was as if a heavy burden had been lifted. As he forgave he was forgiven.

“Because of this demonstration in forgiveness,” says Kenneth, “that phrase in the Lord’s prayer, ‘...forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors ...’ has taken on a whole new meaning for me.”

Forgiving our enemies is the first step toward loving them. But you say, “Rusty, what he/she did to me was wrong. It was horrible. I just can’t forgive it.” I know. You can’t. But would you just now consider asking Jesus, who has already forgiven you all your sins, to forgive that person for you. Remember his forgiving words from the cross?

And I ask you also, who is your anger and resentment hurting most of all? My guess is that it’s worse on you than it is on your enemy.

Why not wipe the slate clean? Today! Right now!

Let us pray: Loving and forgiving Lord, you know each of our hearts better than we know them ourselves. You see the hurt, the anger, the resentment which has lodged itself there longer than we care to admit. Please, Lord, take all that away. And if we feel that we just can't give it up, let us at least turn it over to you and let you bury it beneath your cross of forgiveness. Forgive us our sins, Lord Jesus, as we forgive those who sin against us. Amen.