

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1927

This is the point in the Sermon on the mount where we encounter for the first time the word which summarizes everything in it: love. Immediately it is put into the clear-cut context of love for our enemies. Loving one's kindred is a commandment that could be misunderstood. Loving enemies makes unmistakably clear what Jesus intends.

“Enemy” was no empty concept for the disciples. They knew it well. They met enemies daily. There were those who cursed them as destroyers of the faith and lawbreakers; there were those who hated them because they had left everything for Jesus' sake and did not highly value anything but communion with him; there were those who insulted and scorned them for their weakness and humility; there were those who persecuted them, who feared a growing revolutionary danger in the group of disciples and were intent on destroying them.

Loving one's enemies is not only an unbearable offense to the natural person. It demands more than the strength a natural person can muster, and it offends the natural concept of good and evil. But even more important, loving one's enemies appears to people living according to the law to be a sin against God's law itself. Separation from enemies and condemning them is what the law demands. But Jesus takes God's law into his hands and interprets it. To overcome enemies by loving them—that is God's will which is contained in the law.

In the New Testament, the enemy is always the one who hates me. Jesus does not even consider the possibility that there could be someone whom the disciple hates. Enemies should receive what sisters and brothers receive, namely, love from Jesus' followers. The actions of the disciples should not be determined by the human actions they encounter, but by Jesus acting in them. The only source of the disciples' action is the will of Jesus.

Jesus speaks of enemies, that is, of those who will remain our enemies, unmoved by our love; those who do not forgive us anything when we forgive them everything; those who hate us when we love them; those who insult us all the more, the more we serve them. “In return for my love they accuse me, even while I make prayer for them” (Ps. 109:4). But love must not ask if it is being returned. Instead, it seeks those who need it. But who needs love more than they who live in hate without any love? Who, therefore, is more worthy of my love than my foe? Where is love praised more splendidly than amidst love's enemies?

This love knows no difference among diverse kinds of enemies, except that the more animosity the enemy has, the more my love is required. No matter whether it is a political or religious enemy, they can all expect only undivided love from Jesus' followers. I am asked, how does this love act? Jesus says: bless them, do good to them, pray for them without condition, without regard for who they are.

“Love your enemies.” Unhypocritically and purely we are to serve and help our enemies in all things. No offering which a lover would bring to a beloved can be too great and too valuable for our enemies. If, because of love for our kindred, we are obliged to offer our goods, our honor, and our life, then in the same way we are obliged to offer them for our enemies. Does this, then, make us participants in the evildoing of our enemies? No, for how should that love which is born

not of weakness but of strength, which comes not from fear but from the truth, become guilty of the hatred of another? And to whom must such love be given, if not to those whose hearts are suffocating in hate?

“Bless those who curse you.” If our enemies curse us because they cannot bear our presence, then we should lift our hands to bless them: “You, our enemies, be blessed by God; your curse cannot harm us, but may your poverty be filled by the riches of God, by the blessing of God, against whom you rail in vain. We shall willingly bear your curse, if only God’s blessing comes over you.”

“Do good to those who hate you.” Words and thoughts are not enough. Doing good involves all the things of daily life. “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink” (Rom. 12:20). In the same way that brothers and sisters stand by each other in times of need, bind up each other’s wounds, ease each other’s pain, love of the enemy should do good to the enemy. Where in the world is there greater need, where are deeper wounds and pain than those of our enemies? Where is doing good more necessary and more blessed than for our enemies? “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

“Pray for those who abuse and persecute you.” That is the most extreme. In prayer we go to our enemies, to stand at their side. We are with them, near them, for them before God. Jesus does not promise us that the enemy we love, we bless, to whom we do good, will not abuse and persecute us. They will do so. But even in doing so, they cannot harm and conquer us if we take this last step to them in intercessory prayer. Now we are taking up their neediness and poverty, their being guilty and lost, and interceding for them before God. We are doing for them in vicarious representative action what they cannot do for themselves. Every insult from our enemy will only bind us closer to God and to our enemy. Every persecution can only serve to bring the enemy closer to reconciliation with God, to make love more unconquerable.

What is undivided love? Love which does not show special favor to those who return our love with their own. In loving those who love us, our kindred, our people, our friends, yes, even our Christian community, we are no different than the Gentiles and the tax collectors. That kind of love is self-evident, regular, natural, but not distinctly Christian. Yes, in this case it really is “the same” thing that non-Christians and Christians do. Loving those who belong to me through blood, history, or friendship is the same for non-Christians and Christians. Jesus does not have a lot to say about that kind of love. People know all by themselves what it is. He does not need to light its flame, to emphasize it or exalt it. Natural circumstances alone force it to be recognized, for non-Christians and for Christians. Jesus does not need to say that people should love their sisters and brothers, their people, their friends. That goes without saying. But by simply acknowledging that and not wasting any further words on it, and, in contrast to all that, commanding only love for enemies, he shows what he means by love and what they are to think about the other sort of love.

How are disciples different from nonbelievers? What does “being Christian” consist of? At this point the word appears toward which the whole fifth chapter is pointed, in which everything already said is summarized: what is Christian is what is “peculiar,” *perisson*, the extraordinary, irregular, not self-evident.