

Martin Luther King, Jr., “*Loving Your Enemies*,” March 7, 1961

“Ye have heard it said of old that thou shall love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.”

These are great words, words lifted to cosmic proportions. And over the centuries men have argued that the actual practice of this command just isn’t possible. But we have come to see today that, far from being the impractical idealist, Jesus is the practical realist, and the words of this text stand before us with new urgency. And far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, love is the key to the solution of the problems of our world, love even for enemies. And so we may well begin by raising the practical “how”—How do we go about loving our enemies?

There are many things that we must do in order to love our enemies, but I would like to suggest just three. It seems to me that the first thing that the individual must do in order to love his enemy is to develop the capacity to forgive with a naturalness and ease. If one does not have the capacity to forgive, he does not have the capacity to love.

Now it is assumed that the individual or the group who is our enemy has done something to hurt us. That individual has mistreated us or has mistreated our group, so to speak, and this creates a conflict situation. Now, the only way to grapple with this conflict situation is that the mistreated person, the hurt person, the injured person, must develop the capacity to forgive, for it is only the individual who is injured or who is hurt that can forgive. The person who hurts must repent, but the person who is hurt is the one that must forgive. And it is through this method that we are able to restore the moral balance of society or individual relationships, for in the final analysis, forgiveness means a willingness to go any length to restore a broken relationship. Forgiveness means the development of a new relationship. And I submit to you that the first way that one can go about loving his enemy neighbor is to develop the capacity to forgive.

The second thing is this. In order to love the enemy we must recognize that the negative deed of the enemy does not represent all that the individual is. His evil deed does not represent his whole being. If we look at ourselves hard enough, and if we look at all men hard enough, we see a strange dichotomy, a disturbing schizophrenia. We are divided against ourselves, split up so to speak. There is something within all of us which causes us to cry out with Ovid the Latin poet, “I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do.” Or we find ourselves crying out with the Apostle Paul, “The good that I would I do not, and the evil that I would not that I do.” Or we cry out with Carlyle that “there are depths in man which go down to the lowest hell and heights which reach the highest heaven, for are not both heaven and hell made out of him, everlasting miracle and mystery that he is.”

And this means that there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. And when we come to see this we begin to love all men. We see an element of good even in the person who is seeking to defeat us and even in the person of the group that hates us most.

And finally we come to see that there is within every man the image of God, and no matter how much it is scarred, it is still there. And so when we come to recognize that the evil act of our enemy neighbor is not the whole being of our enemy neighbor, we develop the capacity to love him in spite of his evil deed.

The other thing that we must do in order to love the enemy neighbor is this: we must seek at all times to win his friendship and understanding rather than to defeat him or humiliate him. For in the final analysis, love means understanding goodwill for all men and a refusal to defeat any individual. There must be an active love for the individuals who may be caught up in an evil unjust system while we continue to work passionately and unrelentingly to do away with the system itself.

The Greek language comes to our aid when we seek to analyze the meaning of love with special reference to our enemies. It calls it *agape*. *Agape* is more than romantic love. *Agape* is more than friendship. *Agape* is understanding, redemptive goodwill for all men. *Agape* is an overflowing love, a spontaneous love, which seeks nothing in return. And theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. When you rise to love on this level you love all men because God loves them. And you rise to the noble heights of loving the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. And I think this is what Jesus means when he says, "Love your enemies." Love is understanding, redemptive, creative goodwill for all men. And so Jesus was expressing something very creative when he said, "Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you."

Why should we love our enemies? I would say the first reason, and I'm sure Jesus had this in mind, that we should love our enemies is this: to return evil for evil only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. And somewhere along the way of life, somebody must have sense enough, somebody must have morality enough, somebody must have religion enough, to cut off the chain of hate and evil. And this can only be done by meeting hate with love.

The other point is this: that we should love our enemies because hate damages the personality and injures the soul. So often we talk about what hate does to the hated person or to the hated group, and we think of the damages that we find in the hate process as it moves toward the object of hate. But so often we overlook the fact that hate is as damaging to the subject of hate as it is to the object of hate. And so again Jesus was right—love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you because hate can destroy the personality.

And finally, we must love our enemies because love has within its very power transforming qualities. Hate serves to destroy. Love serves to build up. Hate seeks destructive ends. Love seeks constructive ends. Hate seeks to annihilate. Love seeks to convert. Hate seeks to live in monologue. Love seeks to live in dialogue. And it is only through love that we are able to redeem and transform the enemy neighbor. So when Jesus says, "love the enemy," he is saying love the enemy because there is something about love that can transform, that can change, that can arouse the conscience of the enemy. And only by doing this are you able to transform the jangling discords of society into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood and understanding.