# Introduction

## A handful of years ago – before smart phones, before Siri could tell you how to get where you wanted to go – we were lost somewhere on the West side of Chicago. We were trying to find a particular restaurant, I thought we were close but we couldn’t find it and I’d already stopped at a gas station and received no help, when I saw a postman and thought, “Here is someone who knows the area. Here is help.” So I got out of the car, ran over to him and asked for directions, only to hear words that have been repeated many times since then, “Buddy, you’re not even in the right zip code.”

## Today we are unpacking the words of the most famous sermon ever preached, which was given by the most famous person who ever lived, and one of the effects of his comments – his shocking comments – is to realize that we’re not in the right zip code. It’s as if we ask stop to ask someone to confirm that we’re on the right path and they look at our map, flip it over, turn it upside down and then point us in an entirely new direction. This sermon turns things upside down. It gives us a vision of a new world – one that undermines our common sense and deeply held assumptions.

## As I mentioned last week, I believe the lessons found here are particularly focused on the apostles, who are in the first hours of their orientation. Jesus is laying a new foundation in their lives, one he can build on - one that will allow him to turn the revolution over to them. But others are listening in, and what he says is for us as well because, well, big parts of the revolution now rest with us.

## Last week’s message focused on the beatitudes – the collection of pithy little proverb-like pronouncements about who’s doing it right and who’s doing it wrong. There we heard: Blessed are the poor; blessed are those who hunger and thirst after God; blessed are those whose heart is broken by the things that break the heart of God; and blessed are those who are insulted and excluded because of the stand they take, the decisions they make, in light of Christ’s claims and teachings.

## In that message I argued that everything pivoted around verse 23. The big point – the one I hoped kept you awake a bit this week, the one I hope you spent some time wrestling with in your small groups – was: eternity changes everything. We need to live today in light of the fact that we are going to live forever. We have to keep reminding ourselves – especially in this culture that is so focused on the here and so dismissive of the hereafter – we have to keep reminding ourselves that: life is short, eternity is not and opportunity is now. We have to shine our headlights beyond the grave. There is no other way to understand who Jesus is, what He did or what He calls us to.

## Today we come to another radical idea. It’s one of the more profound things Jesus says, and one we are both drawn to and prone to explain away – to dismiss as well-intentioned but hopelessly naïve and impractical: love you enemies.

# You heard the passage read for you. Let me read it again, this time in Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*:

## To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

## Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them! If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that’s charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that.

## I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You’ll neve – I promise – regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we’re at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind.

# A few points by way of context.

## First, Christ is countering the Pharisee’s teaching that we’re expected – or at least allowed – to hate our enemies.

### The Old Testament doesn’t actually teach this.[[1]](#footnote-1) You will never find a verse that says, “hate your enemies.” But this was the view they developed based on some passages, in particular a number of Psalms in which whoever is praying calls down curses upon those who are lined up against them in particular or the Jews in general.[[2]](#footnote-2)

### First century Jewish culture was pretty closed – they hated the Romans, they despised the Samaritans, regarded Gentiles as dogs, etc. etc. On top of this, they felt like they had God’s blessing for feeling this way. After all, they were the chosen people; they had the Temple; they had the Law; the Messiah was going to be sent to them. In their view, anyone who wasn’t one of them was against God. They felt some responsibility to get along with each other, but they felt justified in hating everyone else. Jesus is taking this attitude head on.

## Second, what Jesus said here went beyond what any religious leaders had said before.

### Because we live downstream from Christ’s teaching, it’s hard to appreciate what the world was like before he showed up. He has had a greater effect than any other person. Before Jesus came along, humility was a weakness, what mattered most was pride and honor. You didn’t defer to others, you went first. Before Jesus caring for the weak wasn’t part of the plan. Yes, you cared for your own family, but not those who lived outside your community. Love your enemies? Are you kidding? Many now think we should care for the weak – Christ’s views have won over most of the world. But not everyone. And as you see if you travel, most hospitals in the world were started by Christians, even in places where Christians make up a very small percentage of the population. There is a reason why educational institutions, orphanages, soups kitchens and shelters were started and largely operated by Christ-followers.

### Now, to be sure, there are a handful of ideals that are held in common by the major religions: care for your family, do not lie, murder or steal, do not cheat on your spouse. C.S. Lewis referred to these as the Tao.[[3]](#footnote-3) I talked a bit about this in Alpha this week in a talk entitled, “*Aren’t All Religions Essentially the Same*.” The answer is, No. There are some significant overlaps in terms of ethics, but radically different understandings of who we are, where we are headed, what’s expected of us and more. And even in the realm of ethics there are differences. Christ’s statement that we should love our enemies is unlike anything you will hear by any of the others.

## Finally, the third point by way of context, Christ’s words here mean what they say. Love your enemies means love your enemies.

### The Greek word used for love is *agape*. It is an action word. It’s not a command to feel towards those we dislike like the same way we feel towards cute kids and small puppies. We are commanded to seek the highest good for the other person. Love is a commitment of the will to the highest good for the other person.

### And enemies means enemies – the people lined up against us. Think of the person you like the least – the one who undoes you, the one who has wronged you. That is who Christ is talking about. Most people expect what I’ll call a “common sense exception” to this command. We embrace the ideal in theory. Loving your enemies is a noble aspiration, but… it doesn’t apply to this guy because: He insulted me; He betrayed me; He really is a jerk. Or, this is business. Or, I have my rights. Sure, Jesus said “love your enemies,” but he didn’t mean this enemy.

### Well, remarkably, unbelievably, I believe he does mean “this enemy,” and lest there is any doubt, he goes into some detail about what loving your enemy looks like. He gives us six situations in which we are called to active love – not simply to passive acceptance, but to an active, aggressive love.

#### Do good to those who hate you;

#### Bless those who curse you;

#### Pray for those who mistreat you;[[4]](#footnote-4)

#### If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also;

#### If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.

#### Finally, number six, the Golden Rule – do to others as you would have them do to you.[[5]](#footnote-5)

## Let’s be clear. The command to love our enemies is not a command to like them. We may or may not be able to get there. Nor is it a command to turn our enemies into friends. It’s great when that happens, and that is what we generally try to do – to get them to see things our way and become like us. But that is not the command. At the same time, Christ’s statement does not suggest that we cannot – or do not – have enemies. It’s not a command to embrace everything others do, or to call evil good. But it is a command to love them. It is a command to be the kind of person who treats their enemies as if they were friends. And that is quite remarkable.

# With that as a starting point, let’s push a bit deeper, because my guess is that you are drawn to these words but dismissive of them at the same time.

## They are sublime. They are beautiful. You want to live in a world where they are true. But they also strike you as profoundly naïve. They advocate a pacifism that would allow bad guys to take over. You’re thinking that what Jesus is teaching might work in Sunday School or on the playground – it might work if everyone else agreed that they were going to play by the same rules – but someone needs to stand up to Hitler. If I love my enemies, turn the other cheek, give my shirt to the person who took my coat, well, I will be run over.

## In one episode of The Simpsons, Homer was taking a phone survey. They asked for his religious views and he said, “Uh, you know, the one that has all the nice-sounding rules that don’t work in real life. Um, Christianity, yeah, that’s it.” Some of you think Homer was right. He’s not, but in order to see that he’s not we have to go a bit deeper. There are a handful of things we need to see to appreciate the genius and power of what Christ is teaching.

## One final clarification: I am directing my comments at you. I am not weighing in on geopolitical affairs at the moment. The job of a government is different than the job of a person. Some believe that what I am saying here would work on a geopolitical level, and they would point to situations where people have made thoughtful efforts to apply Christian principles on the world stage. (I’m thinking here of the Marshall Plan following World War II or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.) But I am not making any comments here about any of that. These comments are addressed to us as individuals.

# I have three points – all of which are framed by the idea that eternity changes everything.

## One: Love is a powerful, redemptive force.

### Sometimes being nice is all it takes. You know this. You have seen the wisdom of Proverbs 15:1, “a gentle answer turns away wrath.” It doesn’t always take heroic efforts to get along with other people, just a kind word. If we are quick to apologize we can bypass a lot of pain. Sometimes nice is all it takes. But sometimes it takes love – a robust, vibrant, intentional, grace-filled, long-term decision to do the best thing for the other person. Sometimes nice isn’t enough, we have to be very intentional about not getting sucked into the fray. We have to be intentional about loving with the understanding that love can change things.

### This is something great moral leaders – Mandela, Mother Theresa, Gandhi – see more clearly than others. They did things others could not because they kept loving. They refused to do otherwise. They may have fiercely disagreed with what was going on, but they kept the humanity of the other person in mind and tried to act in ways that served them. They believed in the redemptive power in love.

### Dr. Martin Luther King was in that camp and spelled out his view in a sermon only recently put into circulation. It’s called, *Love Your Enemies*. There Dr. King said:

#### Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, "Love your enemies." It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There’s something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies.

## Two: The command to love our enemies is one part of a three-fold approach spelled out in the Book of Micah.

### In Micah, an Old Testament book written by a prophet named Micah, he asks the question, “What does the Lord require of you?” The answer: do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your Lord.

#### Pursue justice, especially for the weak. Stand up against those who are oppressing others.

#### Be kind to others. Be merciful, do not treat them as they deserve – that is mercy. Justice is getting what we deserve, mercy is not getting what we deserve (the punishment we deserve) and grace is getting a blessing we do not deserve. Here the call is to be kind, merciful.

#### And finally, walk humbly with God.

### My point here is: the command to love our enemies does not stand alone; it is complimented by the command to pursue justice and be humble. Neither of these two dilute the call to love, but they shape it. We need all three working together. If all we heard from Jesus was, “Love your enemies,” we might expect Him to be passive and soft-spoken, timid, someone who couldn’t stand up to a bully. Someone who is quiet in the face of injustice in the ways people who are co-dependent are often silent when they should speak up. That is not the Jesus of the Gospels.

#### Please remember, Jesus has just issued a pretty stinging rebuke. The Beatitudes not only contain a series of blessings, but also of woes. He has issued a series of hark rebukes.

##### Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

#### And He will cause quite a scene in the temple courtyard, overturning tables, chasing away the moneylenders, using a whip to drive away the animals.

#### And when He is struck in the middle of his trial – something that is illegal – He will call them out on it. He will protest the illegality.[[6]](#footnote-6)

### The command to love is not a command to let bullies get their way, nor is it a command to act like a doormat.[[7]](#footnote-7) There is nothing weak or passive in what Jesus is calling us to.[[8]](#footnote-8)

### For starters, the command to turn the other cheek is about honor not safety. Slapping someone on the cheek isn’t what you do if you’re trying to hurt someone. MMA fighters do not spend a lot of time slapping each other. Striking someone on the cheek is a metaphor for assaulting someone’s pride. What Jesus is saying here is, take the insult. Don’t be so concerned with saving face. And turning the other cheek is not the same thing as letting them hit you on the same cheek again. Turning the other cheek means: change the situation, try to force them into a new pattern, give them a chance to do the right thing. This is not the action of someone who is weak, but of someone who is very strong.

### What we have here is a call to the opposite way the human heart works when we are mistreated. When we are wronged we tend to be passive or vindictive.

#### Some people are passive. Many find it more painful to confront than to accept the wrong, so they keep taking the mistreatment; they keep letting the bully hit the same cheek.[[9]](#footnote-9)

#### Some get vindictive. They hit back.

#### Some of us do both – are passive-aggressive.

#### Many do both at once – are passive on the outside while burning with rage on the inside.

### What Jesus is calling for is the opposite. Rather than being passive on the outside and seething on inside, he is calling for thoughtful, game-changing opposition on the outside coupled with a peaceful, forgiving attitude on the inside. What Jesus calls us to is to work for justice and truth while at peace. Do not slap them back, but don’t stay trapped in the same dysfunctional cycle. Turn the other cheek. Force change.[[10]](#footnote-10) It reframes things.[[11]](#footnote-11) It’s radical. You start over. You give it a new chance.[[12]](#footnote-12)

### I’ve seen this with people who finally stand up to a bully – perhaps a parent or a spouse or a boss. They say, “I’m not going to let you treat me like this anymore. It’s not good for either of us. I’m going to leave for an hour. We can talk about this after we’ve had a chance to cool down. But I’m done letting you hit me on this cheek. I’m not going to hit back, but I’m going to force change. It’s the loving thing to do.

### The most brilliant example came from Johanna Katanacho, a friend. I’ve shared this story before, but

### It’s not loving to let your enemy keep sinning. Oppose the mistreatment that shows care and concern and no vindictiveness.

### There are three things to see here: 1) the redemptive power of love; 2) the three-fold approach Jesus is advocating: pursue justice, love kindess (be both tough and tender) and be humble.

## The third major point – the third thing that needs to inform how we respond to enemies – is the understanding that we were once enemies of God, and he responded in love.

### Romans 5:10 reads: For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

### The way I first memorized this was: For while we were yet sinners – when God could expect nothing from us but active hatred and rebellion – Christ died for us.

### Given that that is true, we need to see it as a template for how we are to respond to our enemies. While we were God’s enemies, he loved us. He is not calling us to do something he’s not already done!

### Men and women, we are adopted enemies. If you are a child of God it is only after you were an enemy of God. Some of you think I’m crazy. Let me sound even crazier. If you don’t get this – if you do not understand that you were an enemy of God – then I worry that you do not understood the Gospel itself. I worry that you are not a true Christ-follower. We were not saved because we were so good God eventually saw fit to embrace us. The message is, even while we were bad, sinful, dead to God, He did everything necessary for us to be reconciled to him. He’s the hero, we are not.

### When we get this then there is a breakthrough. When we get this – when we are overwhelmed by this – then we see everything differently. I was once a sinner – maybe not a card-carrying atheist, but someone whose life revolved me! – but God loved me in spite of that. So, I can certainly put up with some slights now. I can weather harsh words. When I look at what has been done for me, it’s not too much to ask me to love even my enemies.

## The Gospel changes everything. Once you understand God’s grace freely given, you are in a much different spot to offer that grace to others.

# Let’s bring this home.

## The most common way people deal with this command from Jesus is by ignoring it. We cannot do that.

## Some of you have enemies right now. People you hate. People you want to see suffer. Perhaps you are locked into some ongoing struggle with them. In some cases these people have profoundly wronged you. Here’s the deal: you need to love them. You need to love them. You need to pray for them; you need to bless them; you need to find a way to turn the other cheek – to turn things around. You cannot return evil for evil. Stop matching insult for insult, negative Facebook posting for negative Facebook posting. Bless them.

## This is not a call to be weak; it is a call to be strong. It is an invitation to move forward. This is counsel from the wisest person who ever lived. This is advice from someone who loves you more than you love yourself. It’s the best advice some of you will ever hear.[[13]](#footnote-13)

## Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

# Quotes:[[14]](#footnote-14)

1. Love your neighbor is found in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:18), but “hate your neighbor” is not. Certain Dead Sea Scrolls – which were used by the Essenes, one of the four parties of Jews in place at the time of Christ – stated that the Jews should “love the sons of light and hate the sons of darkness,” but these were not parts of the Old Testament. It was simply the teaching of various religious leaders. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are a number of imprecatory Psalms – e.g., Ps. 69 and 83 – where people cry out to God to execute justice against those who are unjustly oppressing them. Many are troubled by these Psalms. I cannot give a full treatment here, but a few things are worth noting: 1) the situations in which people are praying these prayers are extreme; 2) these prayers are balanced by an ongoing call to “love our enemies” (Ps. 35:12-14; 109:4-5); 3) the prayer acknowledges the need to relinquish revenge. They want justice but realize that revenge is not an option, they must leave that in the hands of God; 4) they are appealing to God’s promises even as they ask for curses (Gen. 12:3; Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). Tim Keller makes a related point, noting that there are three ways to deal with feelings: 1) the religious way – which is to deny any dark thoughts because we believe that we are good; 2) present culture’s way, which is to deify our feelings because they represent who we really are; and 3) the way the Psalmist does, which is to express them (and own them) but understand that they are broken just like other aspects of who we are. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.M. Bounds wrote, “Prayer is not preparation for the battle; it is the battle.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is the opposite of what was in circulation at the time – don’t do to others who you do not want them to do to you. These ideals are related, and there is not much difference in how they are spoken, but what Jesus calls us to goes way beyond what others were advocating. It’s just another example of Jesus pushing everyone beyond where they are would ever expect to go. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Paul will do the same thing. When he was put in jail without a trial his rights were violated and he launches a protest. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. We cannot be passive in the face of injustice. There is a need to protect the weak. We see this in Job 29:17, after describing how he’d cared for the poor and fatherless, was “eyes to the blind and feet to the lame.” In a list of the righteousness things he had done, Job includes – vs. 17 – “I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth.” There is nothing wimpy about snatching victims from teeth. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Christ’s actions in Luke 23:34 suggest that the command to pray for those who persecute us includes asking God to forgive them. (We see a similar response from Stephen in Acts 7:60). But it doesn’t mean, “God bless them in every way. Make their life easy.” It is far more likely to include praying for their ultimate well-being, and ability to see their own faults and grow in Christ’s image. Likewise, we are told that if someone takes our coat we should not withhold our shirt. The tunic was a sack-like garment made of cotton. Even the poorest man had a change of tunics. The cloak was a great, blanket-like outer garment that was wore as a robe by day and used as a blanket at night. Most Jews only had one cloak, and this was not to be taken from him (Ex. 22:26-27). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Many insist that the passive response is more courageous. I take the abuse and it takes a lot of love for me to take it. That is not courageous. A lot of us are living in pseudo-community. Relationships that are superficial b/c no one will say anything safe. There has to be truth telling first. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Do not simply walk away. Turn the other chance. Give them a chance to kiss you rather than hit you. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Thanks to Timothy Keller for this insight, found mostly in a sermon on loving your enemies. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. If you are bitter you are under control of the person who wronged you. Until you forgive the injustice has won. We overcome evil with good. It’s the way to be a warrior. To love kindness without doing justice is to not really love them at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John R.W. Stott writes: “…all human love, even the highest, the noblest and the best, is contaminated to some degree by the impurities of self-interest. We Christians are specifically called to love our enemies (in which love there is no self-interest) and this is impossible without the supernatural grace of God flowing through us … The question Jesus asked is ‘What more are you doing than others?’ This simple word ‘more’ is the quintessence of what he is saying. It is not enough for Christians to resemble non-Christians; our righteousness is to exceed that of the Pharisees and our love is to be more than that of the Gentiles. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 1) Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much. Oscar Wilde; 2) Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends? Abraham Lincoln; 3) When ever you are confronted with an opponent. Conquer him with love. Mahatma Gandhi; 4) The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people. G.K. Chesterton; 5) I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear. Dr. MLK Jr. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)