Q: How do I learn to love my enemy?

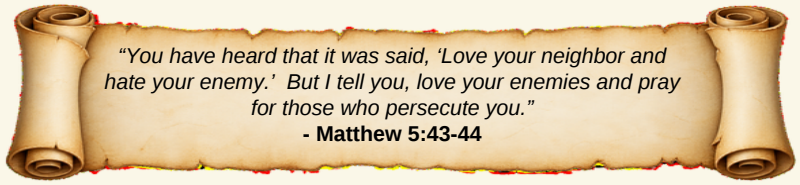
When I came to understand that Jesus distilled the Bible down to two commandments, I was relieved and thrilled.

Love God.

Love your neighbor.

I thought, finally I can focus on two straightforward concepts and work diligently toward achieving my salvation.

But then, He tosses in a third. Oh yeah, I forgot, enemies are neighbors to be loved too.



And not just "my enemy" but "enemies" plural.

I struggle with this concept "love your enemy". And so, like many aspects of the Bible I find challenging or unacceptable, I have ignored it.

But this is where the ease of contemplating God's Word gives way to the difficulty of actually living it. The part that requires courage. This is the real test.

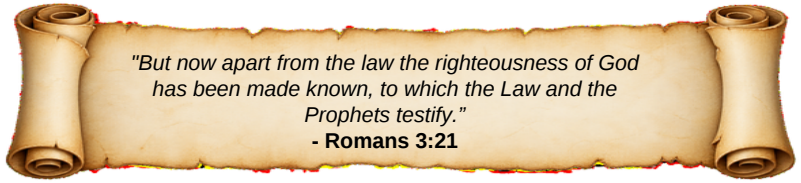
But,…

Who exactly are my enemies?

Love them how?

And, why did Jesus wait to add this to the list of "musts"?

The third directive - "love your enemies" - comes from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. The sermon is the historical moment in which Jesus challenges thousands of years of well-established law to expand both heart and mind to accept a new paradigm.



The phrase "But now…" expresses the pivot. It was composed by the apostle Paul to punctuate this seismic shift in the message from the Old to the New Testament. This two-word phrase encapsulates the change notice: The laws of the past were good and instructive, but now, believers themselves will be reformed.

This shift from the external – laws, customs, and traditions that shaped behavior – to the inner transformation of the heart. The message was clear: From now on, the focus is not fear of failure to comply but love for all.

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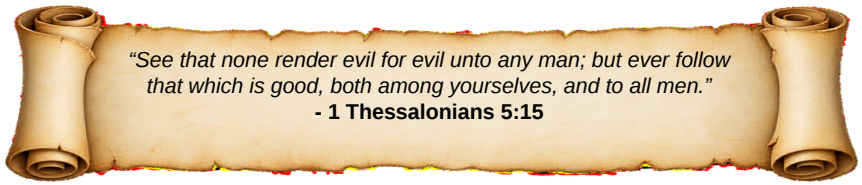
A WORD ON THE WORD:

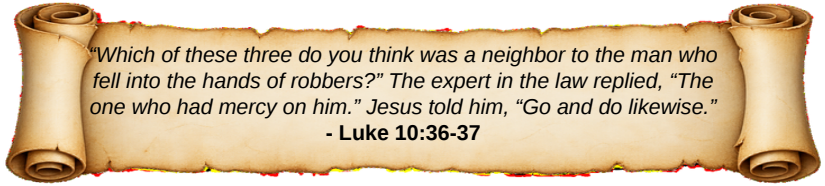
The Greek language had multiple words for love. The most common were eros (passionate, romantic love) and philia (friendship, brotherly affection). Another verb agapáo and its related noun, agape, were closer to "hold in high regard" or "be content with". But the word was seldom used. It was a blank slate – poorly defined and abstracted to banality. The early Christians co-opted it, transforming it from an unremarkable word into the ultimate standard for a righteous life. But unlike eros or philia triggered by reciprocal attractiveness or mutual enjoyment of another person, agape was defined as a deliberate act of the will – a choice to seek the ultimate well-being of another person regardless of how they respond.

The stunning mandate issued by Jesus - "love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you" – must have shocked both disciples and followers. Hard to imagine such a revolutionary concept being readily absorbed and put into action immediately.

While there are many references to loving one another and overcoming evil with good, this extraordinary command is not repeated frequently or explicitly throughout the New Testament.

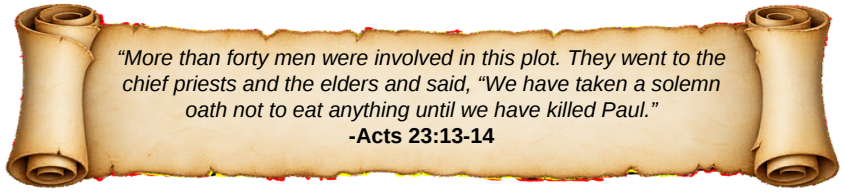


Through Jesus' words, we are reminded of the parable of the Good Samaritan. A traveling man is robbed, beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. Badly wounded and near death, he is ignored (even by passing Jewish priests) until a man, a Samaritan, stops to help. The Samaritans were an ethnic and religious group deeply despised by Jews. But this good Samaritan treated the man's wounds, carried him to an inn, and even guaranteed payment for his ongoing care.



Would I stop to aid a stranger I considered an enemy?

I am not naïve enough to dismiss that there are those in the world who wish me harm or even death. I also know I rarely if ever experience dangerous and deadly enemies, certainly not as often and as people in ancient times.



Was Paul able to absorb the message and love the men who swore to kill him?

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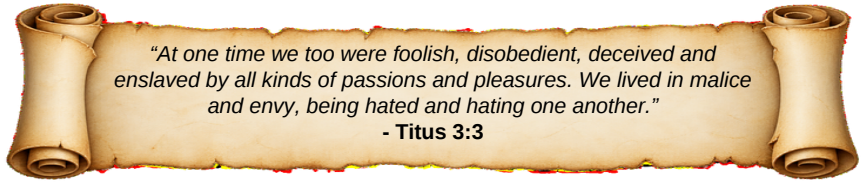
If I werePaul, could I find it in my heart to love them?

Satan himself is often referred to as “the adversary” or “the enemy”. Am I being told to also love him?

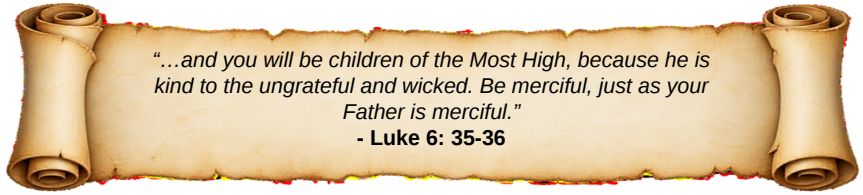
Calling another an “enemy” has a catalyzing effect. It detaches and dehumanizes our fellow man from the rest of humanity.

But being directed to actually love our enemies seems a task too far, a demand that exceeds human emotional capacity.



However, Jesus is not asking us to love perfectly and universally without reservation. He knows we do not possess the unconditional variety of love only God knows. For a society filled with boundless love would be quickly overwhelmed and begin to unravel when scarcity reappears or calamity strikes.

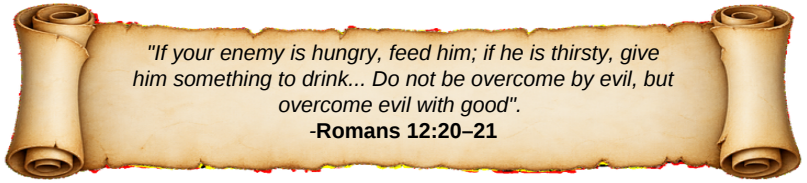
Jesus is not making a collective appeal to nations or groups, but a personal call – God speaking directly to each of us to interrupt the chain of endless retribution and revenge.



Additionally, we are not told to erase our natural predisposition for justice. Nor are we asked to develop a stoic tolerance for abuse, wrongdoing, or violence.

As followers of Christ, we are called to think and act differently in this fallen world. To set ourselves apart. In other words, “holy”.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes:

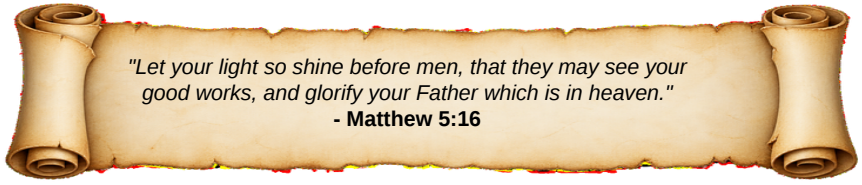


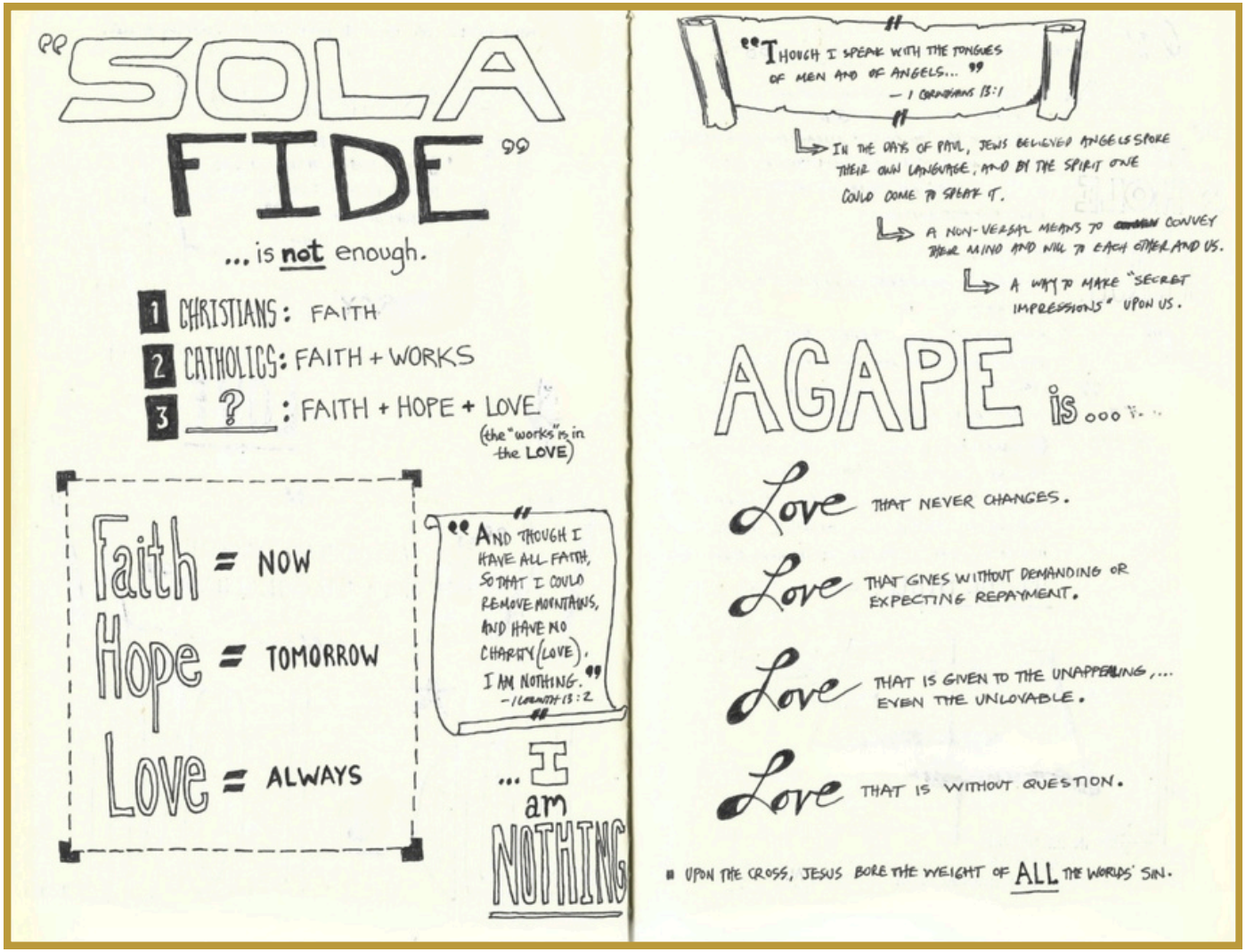
We are asked to consciously disable our reflex to strike back and replace it with an act of will, a choice toward self-control.

To identify every person we encounter as a true child of God. And when the opportunity presents itself, care for them not as an enemy, or even as “one of us”, but as ourself.

Totake theopportunity to sacrifice our needs for theirs and stand before God on their behalf in prayer.

To ask God to bless them, to know Him, and be changed by Him in the process.





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