

Lord Jesus, help us to love one another beyond our love for ourselves with a self-sacrificing love as You have loved us. Make us rich in all good works, and teach us how best to help those who are in need of Your love and assistance through us. Cause us to grow more and more like You, our Good Samaritan, identifying and fulfilling the many needs You place before us in the lives of one another, for the sake of Your great love to us all. Amen.

[Jesus said,] "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In Christ Jesus, who loves all His neighbors, friend and foe, including you even when you were still His foe, dear fellow redeemed:

It always tickles me a bit reading in John 8 when Jesus' enemies make this charge against Him: "Are we not right in saying that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered: "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father and you dishonor Me." Jesus did not defend Himself in regard to the charge of being a Samaritan. He obviously did not consider such a charge to be dishonoring. And in truth, we often point out that in regard to our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus is our Good Samaritan. Ethnically Jesus was a Jew, not a Samaritan, but He came as Savior of all, including Samaritans.

So, for our edification as we consider our Sermon on the Mount text, let us hear the evangelical imperative and apply it to our everyday lives: **Love Those Who Hate You Just As Jesus, Your Good Samaritan, Does.**

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Samaritans were people of adulterated Jewish heritage. They were those from the northern 10 tribes who had intermarried with Assyrians after the dispersion of the northern kingdom in Israel. Most Jews of Jesus' day regarded these neighboring inhabitants outside the bounds of true Judaism and there was a long standing deep-seated hostility between these two groups of people in Palestine.

What makes the story of the Good Samaritan startling is that it appears that this ethnic enemy stopped to help a Jewish crime victim. And the help was not just first aid, but a generous caring that was sustained until recovery. All of this was told the lawyer who wanted to know from Jesus who his neighbor was that he was called upon to love as he loved himself.

Recently you may have heard that the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts asked citizens with spare space to house migrants after the state declared an emergency over an influx of undocumented migrants that has caused *"a severe lack of shelter availability in the state."* Maybe you laughed at this, as I did mockingly, BUT this does mirror the loving act of the Good Samaritan. Yes, there is the danger factor, but that was probably the reasoning of the priest and Levite who passed by their fellow countryman offering no help. Do not misunderstand, it is not necessarily a sin to say "no" to the suggestion to house such strangers today. Conscience and circumstances will guide the Christian in making such a decision, but we should not dismiss it out of hand. Such an act could very well be in accord with the perfect love Jesus calls upon us to have for our neighbors, which our Father in heaven has for all people.

After all, what did the heavenly Father do? He sacrificed His only begotten Son for all who hate Him according to their sinful nature. Yes, that means even you. Remember the Apostle Paul's words to the Romans: "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us ... while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son."

Jesus quotes a common misunderstanding among us sinners: "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But Jesus says to you: "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven." That is so strange to our naturally sinful ears. But where would you be if God the Father operated with that same misunderstanding of hating enemies? You would be lost for all eternity, separated from your Creator God who not only made the human race to be perfect but still demands that perfection from each and every one of us today.

What does this mean, when Jesus says: "God the Father makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."? God, our loving provider of all that we need for this body and life, shows no distinction in the family of mankind. Those who believe and trust in Him receive the same provisions, so that their crops receive sunshine and rain as needed to grow and prosper just as do those of the unbeliever.

This is how you have come to know your Lord. You trust in His unconditional love based on His own love for you in His Son alone. It is not based on anything found in you. Remember the lawyer who came to Jesus was seeking to justify himself and when he heard he was to do likewise as the Good Samaritan did in order to fulfill loving neighbor as self; there was no wiggle room to be found. Jesus calls upon us to be perfect in every way and at all times just as the Father in heaven is perfect in His love for all.

Yikes, God's Law is not easy to hear! "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" Have you found the justification you need before your perfect God in yourself? Of course not!

So we go back to the Good Samaritan, our Good Samaritan, Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God who came to substitute Himself for you and me and all sinners. He loved His enemies. Remember Him praying: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." Jesus called Judas "friend" at the time of his betrayal. He loved His enemies and still does to this day.

His rescue plan involved more commitment and personal sacrifice than the Samaritan in the Gospel lesson. Our Good Samaritan loved us to the point of death suffering our eternal death for each and every one of us, for each and every sin carried out with our tongues, hands and feet and other members of our bodies, every sin mulling about in the secrets of our minds. The Father's eternal wrath was poured down upon His Son, so that all your sin was paid for by the holy Son of God. By His wounds you are healed.

The lawyer did not find justification in the good Samaritan he heard about, but there was justification in THE Good Samaritan who was speaking to him. Jesus found that man wounded by his sin and came to suffer and die for him, just as He came to do the same for you. By His wounds you are healed.

Justified by the blood and righteousness of your Good Samaritan you now get to love your neighbors as yourself, even your enemies. Put to death your hatred, your vengeance, your grudges against your neighbor who acts out in unloving ways toward you. It may be easier to do with that occasional brush with a rude stranger, but put to death those evil responses to those who are the closest to you, who offend you again and again in your everyday life even under your same roof - at home or at church.

Once, early in their transformed lives as Jesus' disciples, James and John were taught this lesson by Jesus. They were with Jesus as they came to a Samaritan village which rejected Jesus. Their response to Jesus was this: "Lord, do You want us to call fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Jesus rebuked them and may have said this: "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man came not to destroy people's lives but to save them." They struggled with these unwholesome desires their entire lives, just as they continued to argue even before Jesus who among them was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

But an example of a Christian also doing the right thing in fulfillment of loving neighbor as self we can look to Stephen. When he was being stoned to death, he prayed for his enemies just like Jesus did and said: "Lord, do

not hold this sin against them." The history of the Christian Church is filled with such accounts of many martyrs who boldly confessed their faith in their Good Samaritan, Jesus and prayed for their enemies, who were about to kill them. Their loving witness right up to the end caused some of their persecutors to take note of Jesus their Lord for whom they were willing to die and eventually were converted to be bold confessors of Christ themselves.

Yes, you will all struggle with your many sins of unloving acts, words and thoughts against your enemies until you breathe your last in this life, but even when you do what is right, this will not save you. Your many sins of failing to love neighbor as self are all forgiven. The power to do what is right comes only from the Spirit working in that forgiveness through Christ Jesus, your saving Samaritan. What joy there is for you to love those who hate you just as Jesus, your Good Samaritan, does. When you do, He is glorified, and your neighbor gets to see the face of their Good Samaritan in your actions and words. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning is now and shall be forevermore. Amen.

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In the absence of Pastor Steven Sparley who was in the Czech Republic for the ELS BWO