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Loving Our Enemies

1 Peter 1:22

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you for your goodness, thank you for your blessings, thank you for this church which is part of your goodness and blessing. Lord, we just revel in the fact that we can still freely gather to offer you up corporate worship, we can still meet without any fear whatsoever and I just thank you for that gift. I pray this morning, Lord, as we open up your book, I pray that you would again give us the gift and the blessing of your Holy Spirit. Lord, as we dive into your word we pray that your grace would be there, that your Spirit would be there, that you would open up our eyes and our ears and our hearts and our minds and we again might make this of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, if someone were to ask me what separates Christianity from every other faith when it comes to behavior, I would only need three words to respond, and they are the three words that were spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in *Matthew 5:43*, he said: *"Love your enemies."* Even as he spoke those words, Jesus

knew that he was saying something that was completely counterintuitive, something that went directly against the way we act, think or feel. Jesus said in *Matthew 5:43-44*: "*You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" As we've been saying, it's loving those who won't, don't or can't love us back that demonstrates the power of God's most excellent way. And we've been putting the words of 1 Peter under a microscope as it were and he said this in *1 Peter 1:22*, he said: *Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.*

This morning I would like to give some final thoughts as to what it practically means to love deeply, from the heart. So how do we love our enemies? I mean, how do we love those who have attacked us maybe physically, mentally, emotionally, even sexually, someone who may have cheated, lied, slandered or gossiped about me? How do I love that person? Well, the first thing that we need to do is we need to understand what God means by the word "love." I mean we think of love as something that we -- that we feel. God thinks of love as something that we do. You know the Pharisees were constantly trying to trip Jesus up, constantly looking for ways to accumulate enough damning evidence to have him arrested, tried and

executed, and yet still he repeatedly did good for them. He did good in his teachings and in his actions. You know when a lawyer, part of this whole group that the Pharisees were part of, when a lawyer asked him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus's answer included a classic example of love that does as opposed to love that feels. The story of the good Samaritan starts out with a conversation. It's in *Luke 10:25*. It says: *And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"* Now you know the Pharisees had an answer for that and you know the Pharisees would have given him a five-point answer that would have identified five different kinds of neighbors with sub sections and sub points under each one of them and the requirements for each. Jesus dispels with that by simply telling a story. This is verse 30. It says: *Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the*

other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion." Now Jesus is careful to paint the picture of religious leaders acting the way religious leaders typically acted. I mean the priest not only does nothing, he goes to the other side of the street to avoid any type of ceremonial defilement should he accidentally touch the victim. Jesus touched the defiled all the time and his power reversed the defilement. Jesus touched lepers and instead of their defilement passing on to him, his power reversed the process and cleansed them. And the same happened with those who were suffering the ultimate defilement, that is death. Those around Jesus including no doubt his disciples, they were horrified to see him actually touch a dead person. Instead of their corpses defiling Jesus, Jesus's overwhelming creative power reversed the defilement of death itself and brought about new life. Well, Jesus's story puts in context how horrified the Pharisees were every time Jesus reached out and touched someone who was defiled to heal them. And so we have the Levite who was again a protected religious class, he reacts to this potential defilement by passing by on the other side. Finally a Samaritan stops and has compassion. Now you know we don't get this story as it was originally given by Jesus, I mean, we have grown so used to the idea of the good Samaritan that we really have no concept of how

outrageous a statement Jesus was making. I mean in his hearers' eyes, the words "good" and "Samaritan" never, never went together. I mean the hatred of the Jews for the Samaritans was profound. And on every single level, the Samaritans were considered the scum of the earth. They were the exact people that the Pharisees exemplified when they said, "Love your neighbor, but hate your enemy."

The Samaritans were a people group that were created when the Jews were carted off to Babylon. And some of the poorest of the poorest of these Jews remained and these folks intermarried with the surrounding tribes and adopted much of their culture. I mean they even formed their own type of worship which borrowed from Judaism and other religions in the area and they borrowed with the conventions of the people they married to. I mean they were considered traitors to Judaism and the lowest of the low. And they were held in such universal scorn by the nation of Israel that observant Jews would literally travel miles out of their way to avoid going into areas where they would even come in contact with them. We don't have a single word to really encompass our version of what a Samaritan today would be like, and the only way I can put Jesus daring to use the word "good" or "compassionate," and "Samaritan" in the same sentence would be to say in 21st century parlance, "a foot soldier for ISIS" happened upon and had

compassion on this victim. In verse 34, he says: *"He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'* Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" Verse 37 it said: *He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."*

Now it's very easy to miss some of the subtleties of this story that all of Jesus's hearers understood. You have to remember the story starts out with this lawyer trying to justify himself and it ends with Jesus trapping him into identifying one of the very people they detested as the only one who practiced genuine love, and he backs him into a corner and the lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." This is right where Jesus had maneuvered him when he said to him: *"Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to a man who full wrong the robbers?"* The lawyer is forced to say: *"The one who showed him mercy."* And Jesus said, *"You go, and do likewise."* I mean, imagine the sting of those words when Jesus tells a vaunted leader who can't even speak the name that he needs to learn how to follow the righteousness of that Samaritan. I mean Jesus is brilliantly doing

three things. First he is encountering and countering the Pharisees' false ideas of love and hate. Next he's instructing all those within earshot as to what it means to truly love, and he's loving even these miserable teachers by taking the time and effort to illustrate and demonstrate to them what God's understanding of love is. Because as repulsive as the Samaritans were to the Jews, my guess was so were the Pharisees and their attitudes to Jesus. Yet Jesus never let that stop him from loving them. And Jesus's story is an illustration of what true love is all about. You see, by making the object of the Samaritan's love a person who's not even conscious, well Jesus removes entirely the idea of love being an emotion or a warm fuzzy. The Samaritan doesn't even have the opportunity to feel either affection or revulsion for the victim because he's in no way able to reciprocate. In fact he's half dead. I mean we don't know if the beaten man could have suddenly come to consciousness and said, "Get your filthy Samaritan hands off me." He's out of the picture. And so by making the victim unconscious, Jesus is focusing on the love not doing what you feel but doing what you know you're supposed to do. And Jesus is basically telling us that warm fuzzies have nothing to do with love.

I mean so how about you and me? How does this apply to us? You see it's incredibly easy to confuse the love that we have for

friends and families and those who think and act like us with the love that Jesus is talking about. That kind of love is utterly without merit in Jesus's eyes not because it's worthless but because it's a love that virtually everyone from pagan to believer is capable of. Verse 46: *"If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"* You got to know the tax collectors were people who were held in absolute contempt by the Jews. I mean these were fellow Jews who would contract with the Roman government to deliver a certain amount of money for which they received the right to extract whatever they wanted to as long as Rome got their share. They were considered greedy, traitors, people who for the sake of money would turn in their fellow Jews. And so Jesus is taking what for many is the only love they've ever expressed and he's equating it to love expressed by tax collectors. Jesus is saying loving the loveable counts for virtually nothing. And we say what? I mean we live in a culture that has reduced love to its lowest common denominator and that's warm fuzzies. That's what I feel. We are used to loving people who we feel good about loving and not loving people we don't really like. I mean in essence we have signed on to the Pharisees' teaching. They said: *"You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."* And Jesus is absolutely unimpressed with that love. He says, *"But I say to you, love your enemies and bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for*

those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."

So let's play the role of the lawyer. We're not going to ask who is our neighbor, we're going to ask who is my enemy. I mean is it gay people? Is it pro-choicers? Is it those marriage equality folks? Is it ISIS? Is it Syrian refugees? I mean those folks are just the surface that Jesus expects us to scratch. There's also the deeply personal enemies all of us might have, the people who've slighted us, gossiped about us, lied to us and sought to gain somehow at our expense. That doesn't matter if you're in kindergarten or if you are a senior citizen, you will accumulate people who are out to gain something somehow at your expense. These are the people that Jesus is honing in on. And what he's proposing is so radically different than what we are used to that we seldom really hear what he is saying. Loving the loveable simply doesn't count in Jesus' economy: *"And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"* I mean Jesus is calling on us to radically re-examine who we love, how we love and why we love. And he is challenging us to ask ourselves to love people we would never consider loving before, not by having warm fuzzies for them but by doing whatever is necessary to further their well-being and ultimately their salvation.

So Jesus challenges us to ask ourselves, can I love someone I don't like? Well, we not only can; we must. I mean we're talking about loving our enemies. An enemy is someone who in some way has come after you. I don't like people who've done that to me. But I'm not required to like them. I'm required to love them, and that is the difference. Again love is not what you do -- love is what you do, it's not what you feel. So the question is, okay, then how do we do that kind of love?

Well, the first thing that we have to recognize and understand is that we don't supply our love to others. I mean rather we let God's love flow through us to love others by his love. And I know to some folks that sounds like gobbledygook but you have to understand that our capacity to love is quite limited and God's capacity is limitless. And loving one another is not a matter of sucking it up and putting on a happy face and conjuring up warm fuzzies to someone who hurts me. It's wanting to do our best for an enemy and we know we can't do that, but God can do that through us. *Romans 5:5* tells us: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* You see, if you are a child of God, you have God living right now inside you. And God is waiting to demonstrate the power of that love and it's not demonstrated by loving lovely people. *Romans 5:8* says: *But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners,*

Christ died for us. And he expects us to demonstrate his love to others while they are still unlovely.

So how do we do that? How do we respond when someone attacks us? Well, first it's a matter of perspective: We look God-ward. And secondly is a matter of patience: We look inward. And third is a matter of prayer: We look outward to God and his kingdom. We look God-ward, inward and outward. And first is the perspective of God's word. You see the ability to love my enemy starts with my understanding not of my enemy but of God. See, if God is absolutely sovereign, if he controls every single molecule of the entire universe all the time, then there's no such thing as random anything including an attack by an enemy. I mean if everything happens according to his providential will, then the good news is there is no such thing as random chance. Well, the bad news is that God is responsible ultimately for every rotten thing there is in this world. I mean we often have this dilemma stated as: If God is all loving, then he can't be all powerful because there's just too much rotten stuff that happens. And if God is all powerful, then he can't be all loving again because too much rotten stuff happens. I mean it's a classic dilemma. It's a classic choice between two bitter awful options. But as believers we know there's a third option. That is there is a God who is all powerful and all good and responsible for the rotten stuff and that we just

see this world, as Paul says, through a glass darkly, and that the essence of faith is trusting in God's goodness in the face of this fallen world's badness. To a world that tells us explain war, explain poverty, explain sickness, we say our only answer to the world's rot is the cross. I mean when I don't understand or comprehend the horrors of this world, the first thing I need to do is seek the perspective of God's word. I want to get Christ's mind. *Philippians 2:5* says: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* I read that scripture and I remember that as fallen and as wicked as this world is that God joined us here and that he lived with us here not as a king but as a servant and not just well but perfectly, and then beaten to a bloodyed, naked pulp, he died on a cross so we wouldn't be stuck in this world forever. And what he asks of us is faith, trust for those things we simply cannot fathom. I mean we believe that he controls every single molecule because he's told us in his word over and over again the extent of his care. Jesus says in *Matthew 10:29*: *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all*

numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

So when someone or something comes against us, we need to know first of all that there's a God who's in charge. So the first thing that we do is we look God-ward. We affirm the God of the sparrows is the God who numbers the hairs on my head and that God will not allow anything, anything to happen to me by random chance. We affirm that we are not adrift in the notion of God's indifference when it comes to loving our spiritual enemies, that our God is keenly aware and deeply concerned for how we respond when things turn ugly. I mean, if I think I'm on my own when I'm under attack, I'm likely to respond in a strictly defensive way. If I know that a sovereign God is providentially overseeing my life moment by moment, it will change the way I react. I mean *1 Peter 2* describes the exact attitude we have to cultivate. He says: *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.* Do you get what Jesus is saying here? Do you see what Peter is saying about Jesus? You get the perspective that Jesus employed in order to understand the attacks of his enemies? And

Peter's saying, Jesus is our example when we are attacked. Jesus did what we need to do. He first looked God-ward. Jesus bore those attacks by "*entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*" He trusted his Father for ultimate justice. You see, when I am under attack, that should be my primary question: Who am I going to trust? Him who judges justly, or me, who gets it wrong at least fifty percent of the time?

So loving my spiritual enemy starts first by looking God-ward. And secondly, we look inward. Here is where patience is critical because there's nothing more natural than wanting to hurt back when somebody hurts us. That's why God's way is so counterintuitive. It goes directly against our natural impulses. That's why James says in *James 1: Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.* That's why we need patience. We need to slow down to understand the nature of the attack to see whether my enemy is personal or spiritual. See, a personal enemy is somebody that I have offended. A spiritual enemy is someone whom the Spirit of Christ within me has offended. And there is a profound difference between the two. And it is critically important to be able to distinguish offenses that I've got some responsibility for and ones that the gospel itself is responsible for. I mean oftentimes people blame the offense of the

gospel when it really is their own offensive behavior that's at fault. And especially when we're in the heat of the battle, we need to see whose ox is being gored here, whether it's mine or the kingdom's. Listen to how Paul put this. In 2 Corinthians 6 he says: *We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: By great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.*" Paul is making it crystal clear that loving deeply from the heart is going to cost you. That even when our only offense is the offense of the gospel, we need to be prepared for a hostile response. As Paul puts it, loving deeply from the heart requires patient endurance. We also need to understand that a sovereign loving God may still allow the enemy to bring miserable, difficult and hard times in our lives. And when that happens instead of simply reacting, we need to look inward to identify just what it is God is

accomplishing through these circumstances. I can think of at least three possibilities where God will allow us to struggle even when there is -- quote -- "no fault in our ministry." When we feel that pressure we need to ask ourselves: Is this for the glory of God? Or is this happening for my own spiritual growth or is this happening for the sake of the gospel itself? Well, first if it's for the glory of God, well, guess what? That's what we're here for. That's why we're on this planet. I mean the glory of God is his character and his attributes on display and we are the billboards, we are the way, the means that God used to display his character and his attributes. We display God to a world that fears and loathes him and doesn't even realize it. And sometimes that's a painful process.

A classic example is the blind man of John's gospel. This is *John* 9. Speaking of Jesus, it says: *As he passed by, he -- Jesus -- saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."* Now the disciples could see only two different explanations for this man's blindness, I mean it was either his sin or his parents'. Jesus says it's neither. He says it is so the works of God may be on display. That is what the glory of God is all about. If God

chooses to display his character and his attributes through some part of my life, do not expect the world to applaud. Remember, the world hates God. The blind man received his sight and he glorified God and because of that he gets kicked out of the temple. Again, you have to understand the context here. Getting kicked out of the temple means you are cut off from your culture, from your companions, from your very economic means of existence. You are essentially an outcast. And all of this happens to the blind man who now sees through no fault whatsoever of his. He winds up getting pulled into this huge controversy because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. And even his parents get called in. I mean the Pharisees are calling the whole thing a fraud. Listen to this, this is *John 9* starting at verse 18. It says: *The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and that he had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be the Christ; he was to be put out of the synagogue.) Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So for the second time they called the man who had been*

blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are the disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out. See, the blind man gave glory to God and he made himself a whole brand new set of enemies. Now would you be willing to pay the cost of being that honest? I mean our costs in claiming Christ are not usually physical or economic, they're mostly social or psychological. And we don't like to be thought of as different, religious, fanatical. But God says glorifying him is always going to have a price. 1 Peter 4 says: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon*

you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share in Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. See if someone wants to think that I am different or religious or fanatical, believe me that's an awful small price to pay for glorifying God.

So how do I respond if God chooses to glorify himself through my spiritual enemies? Well Peter says it well in verse 13: *But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.* Well, the next question we ask is, well, is this perhaps happening for my spiritual growth? Well ask yourself a very practical question. Have I ever, ever grown spiritually when there wasn't a struggle? I mean can I love deeply from the heart without experiencing some form of heartache? I think the answer is no. I mean it's axiomatic. If you want to grow in physical strength and endurance, you're going to experience pain. You've all heard the phrase "No pain, no gain." Why do we think that doesn't apply in the spiritual realm? I mean if the goal is loving my enemies, it shouldn't shock us that God lets us experience the growth pains his own Son experienced as he grew. Speaking of Jesus, God said in *Hebrews 5: Although he was a son, he learned obedience through*

what he suffered. So it shouldn't shock us that we do also. I mean if we have been taught that suffering is foreign to a child of the King, then what do we do when suffering happens? Listen to what Paul told the Thessalonian church in 2 Thessalonians 1, he says: We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. That's great news. But listen as he reads on: Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in all the afflictions that you are enduring.

Well, that's the bad news. See, faith grows abundantly in persecutions and afflictions. You know most of us here know *Romans 8:28: For all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.* We know that God is sovereign and in charge and we know that nothing happens by random chance. I mean the problem is not that God is sovereign or that he works things out for good, the problem lies in our definition of what "good" is. I mean the health, wealth and prosperity crowd sees the good as just that, it's health, it's wealth and prosperity, it's claiming my inheritance right here, right now on earth. But God claims it's his right to define what "good" is on his terms. And he does so in the very next verse, *Romans 8:29, he says: For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first*

born among many brethren. God's very clear. He says you want my idea of good? I'll tell you what my idea of good is, good is being conformed to the image of my Son. That's what good is. Well, God's son was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. He was a man who was despised and rejected, he was afflicted, and we esteemed him not. Being conformed to his image means some of that is going to be part of us. Jesus said in *Luke 9*: "*If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.*" We have the words of Jesus himself telling us to take up our cross and follow him, so somehow or other we've figured out this is supposed to be a picnic? See, you and I are being prepared to love deeply, from the heart. And that means that we are being shaped and molded into the image of God's Son if indeed we have the courage to bear that image. If no one's ever been offended by the image of Christ you bear, could be 'cause no one's ever seen it in you. And trust me when they do, they will be offended. I mean I know I was. I couldn't stand the Jesus freaks and the holy rollers who first gave me the gospel. Now I'm one of them.

So how do I respond to the spiritual enemies God has given to grow me up? Well, we look God-ward, to God's word for his counterintuitive perspective and there we learn that we are to rejoice in the sufferings of Christ that we participate in them.

We look inward to examine our own motivation. We look to honestly ask if no fault can be found in our ministry or if there's something offensive in me that's causing the problem. I mean if it's our offense, if the offense of Christ within me is what the problem is as opposed to our offense, then we are to look at the way Christ suffered. He is our example. And Christ trusted in God's ultimate justice. He trusted in him who judges justly.

And finally we look outward to prayer to God and his kingdom. You know we recognize first that someone offended at the Christ in me is not really attacking me personally. He's attacking Christ. Jesus made that abundantly clear when he confronted Saul for the persecution of his church. Remember, this bolt of lightening comes out of the sky, and Saul is knocked off his horse and Jesus approaches him and says in Acts 9: "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" "*Who are you, Lord?*" Saul asked. "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,*" he replied. Well we know Saul never met Jesus while he was here on earth. I mean his only contact was the followers of Jesus whom he persecuted. See, Jesus takes the persecution of his own quite literally as an attack on himself. And when we are the subject of that kind of attack, our job is to get out of the way. Again 2 Corinthians 6: *We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry.* That is we make sure that it's not me that is the offense here but

Christ because people will always find the gospel offensive. I look back, to me as a brand new believer, the first group of people I ever shared the gospel with was Janice's cousin and his friends. The first guy mocked me to my face, thought I was a joke. The other one told us that he never wanted to see us again. That was Janice's cousin. And you know, my reaction, I remember back forty-some-odd years, I thought well, you can just go to hell, literally. But Christ tells us something entirely different. He says: "*Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.*" Now I prayed for those people and if it didn't change then, there's no question it definitely changed me. So I can't over-emphasize the importance of praying for our spiritual enemies because it opens up the channels of God's grace, it lets you see your enemies as God sees them. It gives you the strength and the wisdom to not take their responses personally. And it also has an affect on them. Though you might not see it, though you must have the patience to see it unfold, I mean 25 years later both of those same people came to Christ.

You know, I once saw -- I was reading an article in *Smithsonian* magazine and there was a quote in there by a 19th-century Irish Cleric and it completely struck me. This what he said. He said: "It is almost impossible to exaggerate the complete unimportance of almost everything." Let me repeat that. "It is almost impossible

to exaggerate the complete unimportance of almost everything." Now if you doubt that cleric's statement, just ask yourself during this next week as you're going about almost everything, will this matter? Will this really matter a hundred years from now? And as you do that, you're going to find you're probably struggling with the complete unimportance of almost everything. But over against that statement is the one qualifier that changes everything. You see, it is impossible to exaggerate the complete unimportance of almost everything except for Christ. The gospel alone changes everything. Listen to what Jesus said in *Matthew 10:42*, he said: "*And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.*" Once again Jesus turns the unimportance of almost everything on its head. I mean, he takes one of the most unimportant events there could possibly be, giving somebody a cup of water, and he makes that something of eternal value in the kingdom of God.

See, we have to understand the good news is that Jesus Christ came to bear the curse of our fallenness and sin and that through his death on the cross we can be made acceptable to God, and we are here to share the blessing of that good news. And we share it by doing everything for the glory of God. And that makes anything and everything eternally important, especially how we deal with our

spiritual enemies. See, to love deeply from the heart is to claim the role that God has carved out for every one of us and it includes loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us. And to do that we first look God-ward to God's word, to a sovereign who says nothing happens by chance, to a sovereign who is a God who judges justly and then we look inward at the source of our spiritual enemies. Are they enemies because of me? Or are they enemies designed by God to showcase his glory? I mean, it cost the blind man his social standing and it might cost ours. And when we're confronted by hardship, we ask is it for our growth or is it for the kingdom's or is it for both? Jesus learned obedience through suffering; we do as well. The gospel will always be a source of spiritual enmity because the gospel itself is offensive. And we in the West need especially to understand what our brothers and sisters in persecuted countries are enduring for the gospel, if for nothing more than to put our witness into perspective. I've said it many times, they face raised fists, clubs, knives and guns; we face at most raised eyebrows. And when we face them, we look inward to find the source of our conflict, then we look outward to respond. We rejoice that we have been counted worthy to suffer. We rejoice that we're finally off the bench and in the game. And we pray for wisdom to not take it personally when it's Christ and not me who is being attacked. And finally we love deeply, from the heart by loving as the Samaritan loved, not by what we feel but by

what we do. We are freed up to love those we might not like because we don't take it personally. And you know these tasks are not hard; they're impossible. They're completely counterintuitive and they go against everything we think, feel or act. You know, if it was easy, anyone could do it. And if it was hard, there may be a few that could muster up; but if it's impossible, well then only the grace of God can make it work, and that's precisely what makes the love of God the love of God. That's why Jesus told his disciples in *Luke 18*: "*What is impossible with man is possible with God.*" We are commanded by Jesus to do the impossible.

So let me conclude with another exercise. I mean I've been asking recently that we all take the time to think about and pray for someone who we would not regard as anything but an enemy, those who can't, won't or don't love us back. This week I would like us to take a minute to pray for a specific spiritual enemy, someone who is offended at the Christ that they've discovered in you. Now I realize that may open up another door here. See, if you've never had somebody who's offended by the Christ in you, maybe it's because you've never demonstrated the image that's in you. So now also is the time to pray that God would give you the wisdom, the courage and the opportunity to get in the game, to maybe make some enemies. That's what we're here for. You see it is impossible to exaggerate the complete unimportance of almost everything except

Christ and his kingdom and our place in it. Let's pray.

Father, right now I just want each of us to take a moment to think about somebody who has harmed us, and I divide it into two different categories: People who harm us because of us, people who harm us because of Christ in us. I want to pray for those who have been harmed by those who found Christ within us. Lord, there's a reason why you do everything. There's a sovereign purpose behind everything and so I pray right now for those who have never had the experience of being harmed or having an enemy because of the Christ within them that they would have the boldness to go forward, to speak like that blind man spoke, to pay the price that it cost to bear the image of Christ. And Lord, those of us who have experienced enmity because of Christ within us, I pray right for your grace, your power and your wisdom to empower us and to empower those particular people, Lord. We pray that nothing happens in a vacuum, that each and every one of those circumstances could redound in some way if not in their salvation, to your glory. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.