

"Lord God, You have appointed me as a bishop and pastor in Your Church, but You see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked Your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon Your Word. Use me as Your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all."

"Sir, we would see Jesus."

LUKE 6:27-38

27 "But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. 28 Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. 29 If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other too. If someone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes away your things, do not demand them back.

31 "Treat others just as you would want them to treat you. 32 If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? To be sure, even the sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners do the same thing. 34 If you lend to those from whom you expect to be repaid, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners lend to sinners in order to be paid back in full. 35 Instead, love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the unthankful and the evil. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

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The Rwandan genocide, also known as the genocide against the Tutsi, was a mass slaughter during the Rwandan Civil War. Do you remember this? Back in 1990, the majority government of Rwanda were the Hutu when 500,000-1,000,000 Rwandans were killed, 70% of the Tutsi population. It was one of the worst human rights atrocities in world history. It was very primitive killing, with machetes, spears, and nail-studded clubs. The lower-class Hutus were promised land and banana farms if they would just go attack their Tutsi neighbors and kill them. After 100 days of this in 1994, the heavily-armed, Tutsi-backed Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took control.

Now Hutus and Tutsis live side-by-side, yet some Hutus still desire genocide, and some Tutsis still want revenge.

Now, 25 years later, a woman named Alice, told her story to the Christian Post, how she was left for dead after getting clubbed in the head and losing a hand. She had to watch her 9-month-old daughter cut apart. She is now friends with a man named Emmanuel. This friendship is so backwards, so contrary to logic, so seemingly wrong. This friendship is not supposed to be. After all, Emmanuel is the person who cut off her hand. But Alice has forgiven her enemy. Although everything points to vengeance, she has come to grips with something deeper: Alice has forgiven Emmanuel.

It's an awful story with an ending that, while peaceful, may not satisfy us. How could Alice forgive the man who was part of savage slaughter? How does that work? How can she trust him? Not only that, but she has made friends with him. The man cut off her hand! It's a risky move. It leaves her vulnerable. But ... do you understand that is what Christians are called to do? According to Jesus,

Christian Love Is At Your Own Risk

1. With the Gospel

Here I would like to comment on the word used for "love."

It is that oft-repeated word for love that seeks the best outcome for one's neighbor. It is *agape*. Another way of saying a love that seeks the best outcome for one's neighbor is saying that this is a love of the will. That means a love not of prior experience or of affections. *Agape* by definition isn't going to feel right. We know that because love as an affection cannot be commanded. *Agape* is practical, not pathological. It is a kind of love that takes self-control and maybe takes practice to perfect.

It is with this kind of love, a love of the will, that Jesus says to treat our enemies. Love the thief. Love the slanderer. Love the one who insults you. Do good to the hater. Bless the curser.

This also means love the person on the other side of the political aisle. Love the fake news reporter. Love the criminal. Love the bully at school who made it his goal in life to embarrass you.

This isn't common sense. This is Christian love. This doesn't mean to be complicit in the person's crimes. Neither does it mean to self-victimize just to suffer, nor does it mean to take part in sin. This love of the will means to want the best outcome, if possible, for our earthly enemy.

We must admit we prefer the pathological love, the love of emotions, the safe love. We eagerly desire things that give us the feels and make us feel good. We prefer easy love. We prefer petty love, love that brings us many happy returns. As it turns out, preferring the petty, easy, emotional love leaves us in despair. For it will take us down a path away from heaven, and we will never gratify our sinful selves enough.

Who here hasn't heard the errant "romantic" life of an immoral president of the United States and loved less rather than more? Who here hasn't heard the duplicitous race hoax of our time, Jussie Smollett, and hated him? Who here hasn't watched the news of the white supremacist who would kill every personality in the Democratic party and scoffed in wrath? Who here wouldn't agree with the sentiments of a victim's survivors as they shouted at the convicted murderer, "Rot in hell!" Who here hasn't pitied the journalists in orange instead of the wicked terrorist swinging the sword through their necks? Who here would blame you?

But that's love of the emotions. God commands us to love with the will. It's easy to love the friend, the ones we embrace, the loved ones we hug, the great, the godly, the pretty good. However, that is not enough. God commands us to love our enemies.

Where do we turn? In hopelessness and near despair, there is only One who has the will to love His enemy. There is only One whose willful love can outlast human pathological self-gratification. There is only One who would go to the death out of sheer mercy, only One who can be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful and perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. There is only One whose spirit is willing and flesh isn't weak. He is none other than Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ looked into the heart and saw the hostility of His human enemy, like one huge rebellious man. His heart pulsed with love against all reason. In the fullness of time, He was born like us and lived under law like us. In due time, Christ died for the ungodly. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were His enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son. That is why He bled the full atonement for our sins, to give His life as a ransom for many.

Drink it in, sinner who hates all the right people. God must have hated you, but no, He came in grace. God must have His Law, but no, He came in Gospel. God must have the sinner die, but no, He would

not suffer that loss. He would not have the world perish. Instead He offers inestimable, unequivocal, everlasting life. Drink it in so it fills you and overflows in a love previously ... not 'you.'

Suddenly, in all of these commands, whoever believes and lives understand that God is telling us a little bit about Himself. **He has told us He is unlike any other God.** He has opened the heart of His Gospel. Open all the holy books, where you will find a God who loves the holy, the righteous, the decent, the upright, the wise. In a last-ditch effort to be just, the gods of various laws and salvation-by-law demand goodness to get into their good graces. The opinion of the sinful heart looks for laws to follow and overlooks true freedom and release from sin.

Here's an example. The question is sometimes asked, "Isn't Allah of the Quran basically the same as Jehovah of the Bible?" Don't they just have different names? No, Allah of the Quran never commands love for his followers' enemies. He says, "Love NOT the sinner. Love NOT the infidel. Love NOT the stiff-necked." This is not a god whose impulsive heart bleeds for his enemies. This is a false god. The most transcendent, beautiful, only true God says these words, "I have not come for the healthy, but for the sick." "I have not come to be served, but to serve." "I have not come to tally your righteous points, but actually put something on the scoreboard, in fact, an overwhelming victory."

2. **With the will**

Friends, this is why our battle has begun. Where we couldn't even begin to fight our instincts, our emotions, our impulses of the self-seeking sinful nature; God has called, enlightened, justified, and sanctified us. And so the true God has moved our hearts to a stronger will. Jesus pieces apart His love as surely as He distributes His true body and blood -- to energize us, to rev our engines for the race, to gear us up for the battle. Where we had no will to see beyond ourselves, Jesus has struck us with a willing love that doesn't give in order to get back. It's a love with no strings attached. He has set us free.

- "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another," Gal. 5:13.
- "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the Law, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code," Rom. 7:6.

Do you see how Jesus changes the meaning of the Law for the believer by loving His enemies to death, His own death, even death on a cross?

On Netflix I recently viewed the documentary of Leonard Nimoy, a project his son put together for his fans. Leonard Nimoy of course was the actor who played Spock, the stoic Vulcan alien on the original series of Star Trek (any trekkies here?). One thing in particular struck me. Vulcans were supposed to be devoid of emotion, so it made the character Spock a particularly challenging role. What Leonard Nimoy figured out was that he couldn't just pretend to be emotionless. Instead, he must play Spock as if he were full of emotions, and constantly holding them back. When he figured that out, he was free to really become the character, and in many ways outshone Captain Kirk and everyone else in that old show.

Do you see what you must do? When you wish to serve yourself, you must serve one another.

Let me offer some examples: 28 "Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. 29 If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other too. If someone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes away your things, do not demand them back. 31 Treat others just as you would want them to treat you. ... 34 If you lend to those from whom you expect to be repaid, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners lend to sinners in order to be paid back in full. 35 Instead, love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in

return. Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the unthankful and the evil. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Do you see what you must do? When you wish to serve yourself, you must serve one another.

"But, Pastor, these things will not save me. All my righteous acts are like filthy rags," you may respond. This is true. Does this mean you don't do the second-most important thing on your list, after seeking salvation? "So I am really not responsible for my neighbor, my brother, or my enemy," you may say. This is NOT true. The good works of a Christian are in every respect deficient, because of an admixture of sinful elements, and a failure to attain perfect goodness. Fine. You are judged on the merits of Jesus, according to the Gospel and faith. That's fine. And you are rewarded graciously as perfect works by virtue of the good deeds of Jesus Christ. Beautiful. **HOWEVER, if you trust all of that, you will also trust that every chance to love your enemy will be God's gift to you.** In addition, by thinking this way, you will fight every temptation to covet, steal, hate, gossip, and attack.

When you want something for the all-consuming ME, instead you must love your neighbor -- that is, anyone near you and anyone in need. When you feel like pre-judging a situation with malice and envy, instead you must put to death the heart of sin. When you are hurt or harmed or victimized, instead you must take it in the kindest possible way. You must! That is the only way for the Kingdom of God to grow. If we loved ourselves alone, if the believers of the visible church were only about each other and ourselves, we would be marching backwards in the battle as the souls of the lost wither into the ranks of hell.

Luther, "We should say to our neighbor, 'Dear brother, I have received my Lord and He is mine. I now have more than enough of everything. Take what I have; it is all yours. I place it at your disposal. If it is necessary for me to die for you, I will also do that'" (SL.XI.596,24).

In the wake of death at large, we know what we must do. Christians are for genocide of the selfish wants, for drowning the inner sinner and hewing off hand that drags to hell, for making friends out of our enemies, and for love at our own risk. This love is how Jesus risked it all, even His life. It is why Jesus took up His life again. It is why He has not yet returned. Until he does, let us love.

In His name, Amen.