

There is an old Irish Prayer that goes like this: "May those who love us, love us; And those that don't love us, may God turn their hearts; and if he doesn't turn their hearts, may he turn their ankles, so we'll know them by their limping."

One of the greatest challenges of living a Christian life is bringing Christ into our relationships with other people. That's because Jesus has a radically strange way of acting that cuts against the grain of human nature. Here in Matthew 5 He says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He goes on to ask some hard questions, questions like: "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others?" What's your answer to those questions? Jesus is saying, "Everyone loves people who love them in return. Anyone can be kind to people who are kind to them. If you are going to follow me," Jesus says, "you're going to have to widen the circle of people you love and are willing to serve."

What do you think about that—really? When someone treats us in a way we don't like, we almost automatically scratch them off our list of worthwhile people; if they really offend us or hurt us then "it's on." We want revenge, or at least an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." What Jesus demands here just isn't fair.

It's been said before, but it bears repeating (until we believe it), that when we carry around a grudge, we're just hurting ourselves. You know, it used to be that armies used to carry around cannonballs, just in case they came across the enemy. Those cannonballs can do a lot of damage, but they limit how fast you can go. Well, a grudge is a lot like a cannonball. They're heavy and it doesn't make much sense to carry it with you. Most likely, your enemy would be surprised to learn you've been stalking them with a cannonball. Much better to drop it at the cross of Calvary, and then discover how much easier it is to get around.

Even if you agree that it is healthier to forgive a grudge, you might still cling to something someone did to you; you might still choose to keep opening an old wound instead of letting it heal. The idea of loving your enemies and praying for them might sound like foolish religious talk to you. That is, until you are reminded of this one fact: there once was a time when you were an enemy of God. Romans 5:10 says, "While we were God's enemies, he made us his friends through the death of his Son." Our sin put us on the wrong side of the battlefield. It is in our nature to want to try to face off against God; to be the one to call the shots. We don't want somebody telling us what to do. We want control. We want what we want, and if God is going to get in the way of that, He's better stand down.

Now let me ask you: When somebody hurts us, we want an eye for an eye. We want revenge. We want it to be fair. But what if God applied that standard to you and me? What if He said, "OK, you want me to be fair, I'll be fair, and let's start with you. I'm going to give you exactly what you deserve for every impure thought; every time you

lived like I don't matter; every time you were cruel to someone; every time you ignored someone who needed you; every time you were petty and selfish and hateful towards someone else. You want to be fair? I'm going to make you pay that bill." What if God really gave us what we deserved?

But listen again to Romans 5: 10: "While we were God's enemies, he made us his friends through the death of his Son." We have hope precisely because God is not fair. While we were still enemies with Him, He took steps to make us his friends. While we were still enemies with Him, He offered His Son Jesus as payment for our guilt. Instead of destroying us, His enemies, He destroyed His Son—He punished your sin all right, but he didn't punish you. He punished His own Son, who had done nothing wrong. Your sin and mine has been dealt with in Jesus, and we now are invited to be friends with our former Enemy. Thank God that He is not fair!

We need to know that Jesus would never ask us to do something that He didn't do Himself. When He said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," He lived it. As He was being nailed to His cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Those can be words for you and me to live by. Once enemies of God Almighty, we are now friends of the Father thanks to Jesus. You can release the power of forgiveness in your life because Jesus forgives you and forgives through you. Jesus wants His people to live out the foolish-looking, wonderfully unfair way of forgiveness.

A pastor during the American Revolution, Peter Miller, lived in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, and enjoyed the friendship of George Washington. In Ephrata also lived Michael Wittman, a man who did all he could to oppose and humiliate the pastor. One day Michael Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. Peter Miller traveled seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for the life of the traitor. "No, Peter," General Washington said. "I cannot grant you the life of your friend." "My friend!" exclaimed the old preacher. "He's the most bitter enemy I have." "What?" cried Washington. "You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in different light. I'll grant your pardon." And he did. Peter Miller took Michael Wittman back home to Ephrata--no longer an enemy but a friend.

Does that story sound ridiculous to you—or realistic? Sounds like Jesus to me.