

# PRACTICAL DISCIPLESHIP

## Loving your enemies, *Matthew 5:43-48*

It is easy to talk about discipleship, but the reality of following Jesus proves far more challenging. That challenge might be why Jesus said few people chose his "narrow"<sup>1</sup> path (*Matthew 7:13-14*). To help us better understand the challenges associated with following Jesus, we will take time this year to consider "practical discipleship", to think about the real-world applications of his way in our lives. This lesson will explore the "practical discipleship" of loving our enemies.

### Love your enemies?!

- Jesus clearly and repeatedly instructed people to love their enemies (*Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 6:27-36*).
- His command develops out of his understanding of God's identity and purpose in the world.
  - God created humans to partner with Him in ruling His creation by representing His identity and will in the world (*Genesis 1:26-28*).
  - Representing God means, for example, that the love defining Him should shape every person's behavior (*1 John 4:7-11*).
  - God's love, expressed to us through Jesus, reveals unexpected selflessness that seeks a relationship with people openly rebellious to Him (*Romans 5:6-11*).
  - Jesus' understanding of God's love-motivated agenda led him to instruct people to prioritize other people's good ahead of their rights or possessions (*Matthew 5:38-48*).
- However, the Bible's presentation of violence complicates Jesus' otherwise clear command about loving one's enemies.
  - The Bible reveals that sin produces all manner of violence that presents a 'real and present danger' to all of us (*James 3:16; Genesis 6:5, 11; 1 Peter 5:8*).
  - The Bible also contains numerous stories of God-sanctioned violence in books like Joshua and Judges.
  - The Bible's presentation of violence complicates Jesus' teaching because it expects its readers to sort out the relationship between them while nowhere offering a clear statement about that relationship.
- While we might debate the relationship between Jesus' command and other parts of the Bible, his basic expectation is clear – ***we should treat enemies with the same love, mercy, and generosity God has shown to us*** (cf. *Matthew 5:43-48; 18:21-35*).
- We should, nevertheless, consider a few passages relevant to understanding the relationship Jesus expects people to have with their enemies:
  - A difference exists between nations and individuals. While God entrusts "the sword" to governments (*Romans 13:1-7*), He expects individuals to embrace His Jesus-

---

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.



- revealed love (*Matthew 5:43-48*). Jesus' challenging expectation becomes more complex for those who represent the government's right to the "sword" through their service in the military or police forces, prompting them to consider how they can faithfully fulfill their responsibility to the "sword" in Christlike ways.
- Jesus did instruct his apostles to buy swords (*Luke 22:35-38*). However:
    - He said two was sufficient for the whole group of no less than twelve men.
    - He later criticized Peter for using one of those swords, telling him that "all who take up the sword will perish by the sword" (*Matthew 26:52*).
    - It seems, in context, that Jesus' concern was not self-defense but being 'armed' to escalate the seriousness of the charges leveled against him (cf. *Luke 22:35-38*).
  - Jesus' teaching about loving and helping "evil" people marries to his expectation that people entrust their lives and wellbeing to God's care (*Matthew 5:38-48; 6:25-33*).

## Applications

I suspect that none of us have "enemies," which raises the question, "How does this teaching apply to us?". So, here are a few thoughts to help you consider the place of Jesus' expectation in your daily lives:

- Begin by asking yourself who might fall into the category of 'enemies' in your life, those who you consider opposed to your way of life. Might it be immigrants (whether legal or illegal)? Might it be those who hold different political opinions than you? Might it be people who have different religious convictions than you do? Might it be individuals with different morals and lifestyles?
- Once you have identified your 'enemies,' ask yourself questions like:
  - Do I extend the same dignity and respect toward others that I expect to receive?
  - Do I rely on politics, economics, and other systems of power to control those different from me, or do I focus on understanding them and serving them?
  - Do I genuinely serve others who are different from me, or do I expect them to become like me?
  - Do I put the concern of loving service ahead of concerns about cost, and do I resist looking for 'loopholes'?
  - Am I more concerned with protecting my 'way of life' or helping struggling, hurting, or marginalized persons?
  - Do I put the good of others ahead of my advancement?
  - In areas of judgment, am I prepared to give up my preferences in favor of others' preferences?

The way of Jesus is challenging, but it offers the only path to genuine humanity. May God, therefore, help us commit to following Jesus, especially in challenging areas like our relationship with 'enemies.'

