How to Live as God’s People

Read Luke 6:17-31


Remember the name Tamerlan Tsarnaev? He was the older of the two brothers responsible for the horrible bombings at the Boston Marathon. Tamerlan was killed in the police chase that followed.

After his death, no one wanted Tamerlan’s body to be buried in their town. But Martha Mullen, a Christian, felt she had to respond. Martha searched for, and eventually located, a Muslim cemetery in Doswell, Virginia that would bury Tamerlan’s body.

In an interview by National Public Radio, Martha was asked why she, a complete stranger to the Tsarnaev family, would get involved, especially knowing she might become the target of angry protestors. Her answer:

“It made me think of Jesus’ words, ‘Love your enemies.’ And Jesus tells us to ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ Your neighbor is not just someone who you get along with but someone who is alien to you…. If I’m going to live my faith then I’m going to do that which is uncomfortable and not necessarily what’s comfortable.”

Uncomfortable. Alien. How about radical and seemingly impossible? Such is Jesus’ command: “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.”

In Luke 6:20-26, Jesus sets the stage for this radical command by first contrasting what it means to live according to kingdom values as opposed to living according to the world’s value system:

To live for worldly ends may indeed lead to riches and “plenty” now (vv. 24-25). The problem is, those material rewards are all you will receive—“you have already received your comfort” (v. 24). By contrast, to live for Christ and his kingdom will, at times, bring sacrifice and pain now. But the rewards are “out of this world”! (vv. 22-23)

But what about that seemingly impossible command, “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you”? Bible scholar Williams Barclay rightly says,
of this radical command, that before we can obey it we must discover what it means. Barclay then gives this insightful explanation:

“In Greek there are three words for love. There is eran, which describes passionate love, the love of a man for a maid. There is philein, which describes our love for our nearest and dearest, the warm affection of the heart. Now neither of these two words in used here. The word used here is agapan, which needs a whole paragraph to translate it.

“Agapan describes an active feeling of benevolence towards the other person. It means that no matter what that person does to us we will never allow ourselves to desire anything but his highest good, and we will deliberately and of set purpose go out of our way to be good and kind to him.

“This is most suggestive. We cannot love our enemies as we love our nearest and dearest. To do so would be unnatural, impossible and even wrong. But we can see to it that, no matter what a person does to us, even if he insults, ill-treats and injures us, we will seek nothing but his highest good.

“The love we bear to our dear ones is something we cannot help. We speak of falling in love. It is something which happens to us. But this love towards our enemies is not only something of the heart, it is something of the will. It is something which, by the grace of Christ, we will ourselves to do” (The Daily Study Bible Series).

Uncomfortable. Radical. Impossible? Actively loving our enemies often is impossible, if attempted in our own strength. But “by the grace of Christ” many have found the power to respond to hate and unkindness with the agape love of Christ. In the long run, such unnatural/supernatural love may be the greatest demonstration of the difference Christ can make in the lives of his followers.

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