

RISING GENERATIONS

THE UPPER ROOM

The Gift of My Enemy

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I like to think about my enemies—about how stupid they are, about how I could slice them and dice them with my wit, about why I’m completely right and they’re worse than wrong. My enemies are on my mind all the time.

Jesus tells me to think about my enemies too. He tells me to love them and to pray for them (see Matthew 5:44). *What? I have to imagine my enemies without visualizing their disgrace? I have to pray for their well-being and see everything from their point of view? I have to love them? Ugh!* That’s a huge pain. I’d rather not have any enemies if I’m supposed to get cozy with them through prayer. Jesus is tough.

A New Way of Thinking

Jesus is also smart. He knows that our enemies are always on our minds. He doesn’t tell us not to think about them but to change the way we think about them—to expend all that mental energy on their behalf.

One part of me wishes that Jesus had never said this, but another part of me is eternally thankful that he set an example for us. By loving his enemies, Jesus showed that he loves us as well. Paul tells us that while we were still sinners (or enemies), God loved us enough to send God’s son to die for us (see Romans 5:8).

God came to us in Jesus Christ, and we humans rejected him. We spurned his teachings, falsely accused him, convicted him in a circus trial, and condemned him to death on a cross. If God needed any proof that we were the enemy, God could point to the cross: “Look here. That’s the sign of how you feel about me. That’s what you did to me when I came to you. The cross proves that you’re my enemies.”

Isn’t it interesting, however, that the cross has become a symbol of God’s love for us? This instrument of death is also the sign of our reconciliation to God. God takes the symbol of our hatred and makes it the eternal symbol of love. What a reversal!

When we consider that Jesus went to the cross not only for us but also because of us, we can be changed. “You love me that much, God? I did that to you, and you still love me? You turned the worst thing we could do into the way that you forgive us?” That’s amazing grace!

A Soldier’s Story

At the end of World War II, a young German soldier named Jurgen Moltmann was captured and taken to a prison camp in Scotland. There he came face to face with both judgment and grace. All along Moltmann thought that he was fighting on the right side. Then the British soldiers showed him pictures of Holocaust victims. The German soldier was shattered as he realized the horror of the Nazi cause.

At the same time, however, the Scottish jailers amazed Moltmann by their kind treatment of him and his fellow prisoners. As he read through the Bible the guards had given him, he came across these words that Jesus had said on the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34a, NRSV).

Moltmann believed that if the son of God could forgive his own enemies, who had nailed him to the cross, then surely Christ could forgive those who had committed terrible crimes during the war; and he gave his life to Christ. As years passed, the German soldier has become one of the most influential theologians of our time. Love for enemies changes people.

Love = Change

Loving our enemies also changes us. When we turn the hateful energy that we feel toward our enemies into prayers for their well-being, something happens inside us. We find freedom from the bitterness and fear that have been consuming our lives, and the venom that has been destroying us turns into a river of life.

Yes, it's hard to turn churning, ugly feelings into love and prayer. But through Christ, who loved us from the cross, we can do it; and when we do, we are transformed.

Dig Deeper

List two or three people whom you consider “enemies.” You do not need to excuse the harmful things they have done, but ask God to bless them anyway. Visualize these people as healthy, happy, loving, and connected to God. Ask God to touch them with healing love. Try this every day for a week; then examine what happened to your feelings toward your “enemies.”