

## **Real Love: Loving *really* difficult people**

Message for Sunday, June 3, 2018  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:43-46; Luke 6:27-28

### **Children's Message:**

**Romans 12:18, New International Version:**  
If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

How do you “live at peace” with difficult people? Sometimes you have to get creative. Like the people in this story...

A small boy at a summer camp received a large package of cookies in the mail from his mother. He ate a few, then placed the remainder under his bed. The next day, after lunch, he went to his cabin to get a cookie. The box was gone.

That afternoon a camp counselor, who had been told of the theft, saw another boy sitting behind a tree eating the stolen cookies. He said to himself, “That young man must be taught not to steal.”

He returned to the group and sought out the boy whose cookies had been stolen. He said, “Billy, I know who stole your cookies. Will you help me teach him a lesson?” The puzzled boy replied, “Well, yes—but aren’t you going to punish him?”

The counsellor explained, “No, that would only make him resent you. No, I want you to call your mother and ask her to send you another box of cookies.”

The boy did as the counselor asked and a few days later received another box of cookies in the mail.

The counselor said, “Now, the boy who stole your cookies is down by the lake. Go down there and share your cookies with him.”

The boy protested, “But he’s the thief.”

“I know. But try it; see what happens.”

Half an hour later the camp counselor saw the two come up the hill, arm and arm. The boy who had stolen the cookies was earnestly trying to get the other to accept his jackknife in payment for the

stolen cookies, and the victim was just as earnestly refusing the gift from his new friend, saying that a few old cookies weren’t that important anyway.

**Message:** “Real Love: Loving *really* difficult people”

There are a variety of ways of dealing with difficult people. There is the macho way, like in some movies: just blow them away. At the other extreme, you just let walk all over, do whatever they want.

Here is how one six year old boy handled his difficult sister. He came crying to his mother because his little sister pulled his hair. “Don’t be angry,” the mother says, “your little sister doesn’t realize that pulling hair hurts.” A short while later, there’s more crying, and the mother goes to investigate. This time the sister is bawling and her brother says, “She knows now.”

### **1) Fighting back doesn't work**

Let’s say the person you have trouble with is a real jerk. (Never mind the fact that s/he thinks the same thing about you—we all know we’re perfect, and the problem is always with the other person.) This person does things to you just to be mean and spiteful. Oh, wouldn’t it feel good to get even! It’s human nature to be like that. People were like that back in Jesus’ time.

**Matthew 5:43, New International Version:**  
“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ ”

But taking vengeance doesn’t work. Two wrongs don’t make a right. Adding evil to evil doesn’t produce good. Paul echoed Jesus’ words when he wrote his letter to the Romans:

**Romans 12:14-21, New International Version**  
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ... Live in harmony with one another. ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. ... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary:  
“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”  
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In a hockey game, if two players start fighting, they both get thrown in the penalty box. When the referee comes over, he doesn't ask, "Now who started this?"

Unfair? Absolutely! But Jesus wasn't talking about fairness. Imagine if God treated us "fairly" for all the bad things we've ever done! No, Jesus wants us to achieve something far greater than mere fairness.

Let's go back to that passage I quoted earlier, about what Jesus says. In the next sentence, he adds three amazing words.

**Matthew 5:43-44, New International Version:**

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies."

Love can mean many things. It can be a warm feeling: "I think I'm in love." That's nice, but it's not enough when you're dealing with a fire breathing dragon. "Love" is a verb. It means action. Not just nice thoughts. It means becoming involved.

Jesus goes on to give us several specific ways we live love for our dragons.

## 2) Next Steps: How to love your enemies

### a) Pray for them

The final part of that passage we've been looking at says this:

**Matthew 5:43-44 (NIV)**

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Luke's gospel has a slightly different version of how Jesus said this.

**Luke 6:27-28, New International Version:**

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

How do you pray for enemies? You bless them. Pray for good things to happen in their lives.

Now, our automatic reaction is to say, "I can't pray for someone I don't like." That's not true. In fact, it is the very opposite that is true: You can't dislike someone you pray for. When we start praying for

our dragons, we find that the loathing, the fear, even the hate is replaced by something else: love.

### b) Forgive them

**Mark 11:25, New Living Translation:**

"When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too."

Again, our automatic reaction is to say, "Well that's very nice, Jesus. But you surely don't mean that so-and-so who did such-and-such to me!" I believe Jesus would reply to us, "That is precisely what I mean. In fact, the more that you hate someone, the more you need to forgive them. That hatred is destroying you from the inside, far more than your enemy on the outside."

In August 1983, Russell Stendal was taken hostage in the jungle of Colombia, South America, by a band of guerrilla soldiers. For nearly 5 months he learned what it really means to love one's enemies. He wrote a letter home, saying, "I am in danger only of losing my life; they are in danger in losing their souls." Russell was kind to his guards at every opportunity, and they became like friends. One day the commander told him, "We can't kill you face to face; we like you. So we will have to kill you in your sleep." Russell forgave them for what was about to happen. For the next 10 days and nights a machine gun was repeatedly thrust in his face under his mosquito net, but the guards couldn't bring themselves to pull the trigger. On January 3, 1984, Russell was released. When he said goodbye, many of the guerrillas were openly weeping.

### c) Do good to those who hate you

Let's look again at that passage as Luke's gospel records it.

**Luke 6:27-28, New International Version:**

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

Danny Moe, a pastor in British Columbia, relates this story just as it was told to him:

**When I was in the army, there was one fellow who got religion. I and all the other fellows would give him a hard time, but it never bothered him. Every night, right there in front of**

all the rest of us, he would kneel by his bunk and pray.

One rainy, cold night he came in off guard duty. He was cold and wet, but he still got down on his knees. I was just getting into bed, and as I took off my army boots, I let one of them fly, hitting him right on the head, sending him reeling across the floor. I laughed and rolled over in bed.

The next morning I went looking for my boots. I found them sitting neatly at the foot of my bed, beautifully polished. When I saw that polish gleaming, that was when I asked Christ to come into my life.

### 3) God uses people to teach you love

Some of these stories I've told end with the fire-breathing dragons having a change of heart. Sometimes it happens; most of the time it won't. But let us remember: our motive for loving enemies is *not* to make them change. If that is what you live for, to make people like you, then you will only be sick and miserable throughout your life.

We all have a problem: we are all—every single one of us—we are born self-centred. God wants us to become like Jesus Christ.

**Ephesians 5:2, New Living Translation:**  
Live a life filled with love for others, following the example of Christ.

Now what's the best way to teach us to love others? By surrounding us with people who love us? No! Back to that passage when Jesus was talking about loving your enemies, he asked this rhetorical question:

**Matthew 5:46, New Living Translation:**  
"If you love only those who love you, what good is that?"

We learn to love by being with people who are difficult to love.

So there's someone you deal with at work who really irritates you. That's an opportunity from God, to help you grow.

### **Bonus point for those who read this far 😊**

Someone once asked General Robert E. Lee about a certain officer, and Lee gave a glowing account of that person. A soldier who overheard this conversation was astonished. "General," he said, "do you know that the man you spoke so highly of is one of your worst enemies, and that he misses no opportunity to slander you?" "Yes, I know," said the General, "but I was asked for my opinion of him, not his opinion of me."