

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany; February 20, 2022
Romans 12:14-21
“Love Your Enemies with God’s Love”

Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse. Rejoice with those who are rejoicing; weep with those who are weeping. Have the same respect for one another. Do not be arrogant, but associate with the humble. Do not think too highly of yourselves.

Do not pay anyone back evil for evil. Focus on those things that everyone considers noble. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, maintain peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath. For it is written: “Vengeance is mine; I will repay,” says the Lord. But:

**If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him a drink.
For by doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.**

Do not become overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Have you ever had a boss ask you to do something totally beyond what you are capable of doing? Or have you ever had a teacher or professor assign so much work for a class, that even if you put your entire life on hold you would not be able to keep up?

When we are faced with a demand to do something that is simply impossible for us to do, it is natural to feel frustrated, isn’t it? Eventually, we even start to feel hopeless. And if there’s no relief from unrealistic expectations, we may even respond to an impossible demand like this: “The boss wants me to do *what* by Friday?!” “He wants me to do WHAT? I can’t do that!”

Well, today you heard your Savior Jesus place a demand on you: **“But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.** And then you heard St. Paul echo Jesus’ demand: **Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse...Do not pay anyone back evil for evil...If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink.**

When you hear that command from Jesus and his servant Paul, you may feel like you’ve just been asked to do the impossible: to love the people who do not love you; to love the people who wish you harm; even to love the people that hate you. And we may want to react the way we often do when confronted with an impossible task. We may want to say, “What?! I’m supposed to do *what* to my enemies? That’s impossible! No one can love someone who hates them! Forget it!”

And it is true that by ourselves, with our own power, we could only say, “Impossible!” to Jesus’ command. On our own, we can never fulfill God’s command to love even our enemies. But we can do it, because of the love God has put in us. So today, instead of saying, “Impossible!” and turning away, we answer the question, “Do *what* to my enemies?!” this way: love them with God’s love; and let that love fill your whole life.

When it comes to loving enemies, God practices what he preaches. We were God’s enemies – estranged from him by sin, lost to an eternity of death, under the control of his enemy Satan. The Bible tells us in so many words that we, by nature, were God’s enemies. And what did God do for us, while we were his enemies? God’s Word says, in this same letter to the Romans: **While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** In other words, while we were hostile to God and lost in sin, God showed love to us by sending his Son to die for us and take away all our sins. This is how God loved us, his enemies.

The Bible has a special word for this amazing love that God showed to us, his former enemies. The word for God's love, in the language of the New Testament, is *agape*. This is the word Jesus uses when he tells us to love our enemies. Paul never uses the word in the lesson we heard from Romans, but he basically defines and describes it without using it. *Agape* is the kind love that saved us from our sins. *Agape* is a special kind of love that is much deeper than all other kinds of love.

Agape love is different, first of all, because *agape* love is totally selfless. When God looked at the sinful world, he did not ask, "What can these people do for me?" He only asked, "What can I do for them?" If God had asked himself, "What can they do for me?" we would have been lost forever, because we had absolutely nothing to offer him. But he didn't ask that question. He only asked, "What can I do to do save them?" That is God's selfless, *agape* love for us.

Not only is God's perfect *agape* love selfless, it is also sacrificial. In pure *agape* love God sacrificed his own Son to pay for our sins and bring us back to himself. In pure *agape* love Jesus lay himself across the beams of the cross and let nails pierce his holy flesh to become the sacrifice for our sins. *Agape* love is selfless, and it sacrifices.

Selfless, sacrificial love is what God showed us to save us. And this most amazing love is also special in another way: it expresses itself mostly by actions. God showed his love and saved the world with action – by sending his Son to the cross. And Jesus came to save us by *doing*, living a perfect life and marching to the cross. This is how *agape* love works: it expresses itself not so much with warm feelings and soaring words, but by acting to help others.

While we were God's enemies, he showed perfect *agape* love to us: a love totally selfless, totally sacrificial, expressing itself with action. So, is it possible to love enemies? It is for God. He showed *agape* love to every member the sinful human race.

But is it possible for us to love our enemies? Yes, only because God has saved us through his selfless, sacrificial, love-in-action. Because this love of God rests in our hearts, we too can show it to others. We too can love our enemies, as God has loved us. The Bible says we can: **We love** it says **because he first loved us**.

When we fall into thinking that it is impossible to love our enemies, it is probably because we are not thinking in terms of *agape* love. We often think of love as an emotional feeling, a warm sensation that we get inside when we're around someone we're really fond of, whether a family member or an old friend. There is certainly nothing wrong with that kind of love, the love that close friends or family members feel for each other. That love is God-pleasing, too.

But if we carry that definition of warm, fond love into dealing with our enemies, we will truly find loving them impossible. They are our enemies, not our friends, after all. So we will probably never have warm feelings and fondness for them.

But what we can – and, as Christians, what we *will* have for our enemies – is God's brand of love: *agape* love. Even though we are not fond of our enemies, even though we are not tied to them emotionally, the love of God in us will move us to be selfless in the way we treat them and think about them. It will move us to sacrifice for them, even when they are at their most unlovable. Even when we see no redeeming quality in them whatsoever, we will still look for ways to express our love in actions that work on their behalf. Notice that in Romans chapter 12, when teaching us how to love our enemies, St. Paul does not say a word about fond feelings or warm emotions. It's all action. Listen: **Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse...Do not pay anyone back evil for evil...If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink."**

And we will do it even though they are our enemies. Even though they attack us. Even though they hate us. Because *agape* love only looks to help the one on the receiving end, without thinking of what will come in return.

All too often we Christians fall into line with the world's attitude toward enemies. Feel free to drop by any Facebook comment section or political rally to see how the world speaks and acts toward its enemies. The world apart from Christ

does not grasp *agape* love. And so when it comes to showing love to enemies, the world apart from Christ exclaims: “It is impossible! How can I show love to someone for whom I have no good feelings? How can I be kind to someone who offers me nothing back? Why would I? And why would I ever show love for someone who hates me, who plans to repay my love with hatred and injury? Impossible!”

For the times we have thought that way, and failed to love even our enemies, we return to God’s embrace for forgiveness in Christ. And with that love of God renewed in our hearts, we set out selflessly, to sacrifice with action, even toward our enemies.

And with that *agape* love of God renewed in us, we also set out to show it to everyone in our lives, including friends, family members, and fellow church members. The verses from Romans 12 do not just speak of showing love to enemies. They also speak of Christians showing love in every aspect of their lives, to everyone around them. And as we do that, *agape* love will again be the key.

There is a different kind of love, which friends have for each other. And that love between friends is wonderful. There is also a romantic kind of love behind husbands and wives and between significant others. That kind of love is wonderful, too. But we all know there are times in the relationships of friends when that fond, friendly love wears thin, or even ruptures. And there are times between husbands and wives when the friendly love is frayed and the romantic love is fading, especially when one or the other does something particularly stupid.

At those times when other kinds of love are jeopardized by hurt feelings or insensitivity, what is going to hold your relationship together? What will mend the frayed feelings and relieve the tension? When every other kind of love between friends and spouses begins to wear out, having that *agape* love as a relationship’s foundation will save it and repair it. Even when your husband has been a jerk and you aren’t feeling very fond of him, *agape* love says, “Forgive, even though he hurt you. Sacrifice for him, even though he doesn’t have it coming.” And once that love has mended the pain, the other kinds of love can begin to heal and regrow.

For another example: when your friend has hurt you, and you have every earthly reason never to speak to her again, because the warmth between you is gone, *agape* love steps up and says, “Be selfless toward her, even though she has been selfish and insensitive to you.” And once *agape* love has forgiven and acted in her best interest, that damaged friendly love can begin to grow again.

God’s kind of love must lay the foundation every Christian relationship. Because when the emotional love of friends and spouses is damaged, *agape* love remains to hold you together with sacrificial, selfless, and active love. Yes, *agape* love is for our enemies. But it is not only for our enemies. It is for our friends and spouses too, at those times when they slip up and treat us like enemies.

When we were his enemies, God selflessly acted by sacrificing to save us. That is his brand of love. And he has placed it in us. Show that love even to your enemies. And let that love bind together every relationship in your life. Amen.