

**The Better Life of Peace**  
Living the Better Life (Part 5)  
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At the outset I'm going to warn you that today's message will be a very challenging message. It will be very challenging to all of us, but it will be extremely rewarding to all of us if we take the challenge. What I'm talking about today is how we can achieve personal peace by working toward peace with our enemies, those folks who have harmed us or wounded us or in some way mistreated us.

On March 16, 1985, Terry Anderson was kidnapped by a group of Hezbollah Shiite Muslims in Beirut, Lebanon. Terry Anderson had been living in Lebanon for almost two years at the time, working for Associated Press as their chief correspondent in the Middle East. He just finished a game of tennis with a friend when he was abducted, placed in the trunk of a car, and taken to a secret location where he was imprisoned. For the next six years and nine months, he was held captive as an act of retaliation for Israel's use of U. S. weapons and aid in their strikes against Muslims in Lebanon. During those six years and nine months he was chained up in isolation in a dark and dirty cell crawling with spiders. He suffered through sickness and endured mental and physical abuse by his guards. For almost seven years the only thing he was given to read was a Bible. Day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year, he read from the Bible, absorbing its teachings. One particular passage kept jumping out at him. It left him dumbfounded. The passage he so struggled with is from Matthew, chapter 5, verses 43 thru 45, where Jesus says, *"You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."* Can you imagine how outrageous that command must have sounded to him as he sat there in that horrible prison cell for 2,455 days?

In 1991 Terry Anderson was finally released. News reporters rushed to interview him, after all this was one of their own, a fellow reporter. They wanted the world to know what he suffered. They asked questions like: **"What was it like to be locked up for seven years?"** and **"What are you going to do with your future?"** But one question stopped Terry right in his tracks. **"Terry, can you ever forgive your captors?"** What came out of his mouth was truly amazing. He said, *"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* (Matthew 6:12) Then he answered the question with a simple, **"Yes."** After a pause he added, **"As a Christian I am required to forgive no matter how hard it might be."**

It's hard to forgive those who hurt you, isn't it? It's hard to forgive those who persecute you and do all kinds of evil against you. But God commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

An essential step to living the far better life God created us to live involves coming to grips with the command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This message runs all through the Bible. This is not something new Jesus is commanding. In Leviticus 19:18 says, ***"Never seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone but love your neighbor as yourself."*** Proverbs 25:21-22 says, ***"If you see your enemy hungry, give him something to eat; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. By doing this you will overcome evil with good and God will reward you."*** We are commanded to love our enemies and pray for those who hurt us because that is exactly what God has done for us! The Bible says, ***"God has demonstrated his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** (Romans 5:8) That's what got our attention and that is what will get the world's attention.

Who are the people in your life that you are unwilling to forgive? Who are the people in your life who have hurt you deeply and now you feel animosity toward. That animosity may be in its early stage, but you are on the road toward freezing that person out of your life forever. Think of someone who you have been unwilling to forgive. That's the very person Jesus wants you to love.

Jesus uses a specific word here for love. He's not asking us to love that person with a brotherly love or a romantic love. He's not commanding you to love that person as a dear friend or a passionate lover. He's commanding you to love that person with a humble, self-giving, servant kind of love. That kind of love will enable you to look for the good in that person and overlook the faults. Having that kind of love toward someone who has hurt you will enable you to heal from that hurt and it will bring peace to your soul.

The Bible tells us there are **some real benefits to living a life of peace**. **First, there is a physical benefit**. Yes, that's right. We actually receive a physical benefit when we have a humble, self-giving servant kind of attitude toward our enemies for it gives us personal peace. Proverbs 14:30 reads, ***"A heart at peace gives life to the body..."*** This is a verse that researchers have proven to be true. Studies have shown that when we have an attitude of animosity or anger toward an adversary it's like a poison that courses through our bodies, destroying and corroding and harming us physically.

We live in a time when people are highly health conscience, always going on diets, always going to the gym to work out. We know the dangers of cigarette smoke. We know the dangers of extra marital sex. We know the dangers of over eating and the lack of exercise. We should also know the dangers of harboring resentment. Research now proves that we will die younger if we have unresolved anger and resentment toward others. Failing to let go of our anger and love our enemies is physically detrimental to our physical health. The benefits of loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us are a proven fact.

**Second, there is a psychological benefit to loving your enemies.** Proverbs 23:7 reads, *"As a person thinks within himself so he is."* A person who has bitter thoughts, bitter feelings, and angry attitudes toward another person will become a bitter and angry individual. The person who hates will be held hostage by their hate.

I read a story about a woman whose son was killed by a drunk driver. The driver got off with probation which enraged the woman. She became so filled with anger and bitterness and animosity toward the man for killing her son that the wound, the emotional wound from the loss of her son would not, and could not heal. She kept that wound open and festering by her intense hatred for the man. Psychological healing comes through loving our enemies and praying for those who have hurt us.

**Third, there is a relational benefit to loving your enemy.** Proverbs 17:9 reads, *"He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends."* When you have resentment towards someone, it's like being in a tug of war with them. You convince yourself that you can't let go of your anger or they will win. But when you make the decision to refuse to return evil for evil and instead overcome evil with good by loving them with a humble, self-giving, servant kind of love, it's like letting go of the rope and refusing to play the game. It preserves the possibility that one day we might have a good relationship with that person. It preserves the possibility of one day rebuilding your relationship with that individual. Martin Luther King, Jr., another man who had many enemies said, **"Love is the only power that can transform an enemy into a friend."**

**Fourth, there is a spiritual benefit to loving those who have hurt you.** This single benefit is well worth the effort. Jesus said, *"If you do not forgive men their sins your Father will not forgive your sins."* (Matthew 6:15) That is a scary verse. What is Jesus saying? If we look at his parable of the unmerciful servant we see how to interpret this verse. You and I have been forgiven so much by God. We are so indebted to God. When we fail to forgive the debts of others, the sins of others against us, we are demonstrating our complete lack of understanding of our own indebtedness to God. Jesus paid it all for us to have a relationship with the Father. We can't enjoy a close, loving relationship with the God of the universe while at the same time harboring a stubborn, unforgiving attitude toward other people. That just trivializes what Jesus Christ went through on the cross to extend His love and forgiveness to us. If you have an inability to rest comfortably in the forgiveness and the grace of Jesus Christ, it may well be that you are adamantly refusing to let go of animosity and anger and bad feelings you have toward someone in your past. Maybe you have a list of people you're still angry with. You won't experience the freeing forgiveness of God until you are willing to forgive others. Proverbs 11:25 puts it this way, ***"The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed."***

**Fifth, there is a kingdom benefit to loving our enemies.** Loving people who have offended us and being willing to forgive them will build up the kingdom of God. A loving, accepting attitude can do more to draw people to Christ and build up a church than any other single thing. When the members of a church really love one another, setting aside their petty and maybe not so petty irritations with one another, the church becomes a place where people really want to be. A loving, forgiving community is contagious! A loving, forgiving attitude will draw people into a church like a magnet! Jesus said, *"If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that... You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it... Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."* (Matthew 5:46-48 MES) The apostle Paul tells us, *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."*- Romans 12:18.

Those are the benefits of making peace with our enemies. What are the steps involved? Let's look at these steps using the word **P-E-A-C-E**.

**Step #1 is represented by the letter P which stands for PRAY.** We need to ask God to take away our hate and enable us to love those who have hurt us. Jesus said, *"Ask and it will be given unto you."* (Matthew 7:7) Who came to your mind when I asked you to think of someone you feel animosity toward, someone you can't forgive? Who are you unwilling to love with a humble, servant like attitude? **Pray** for the ability to love that person. Jesus says, *"Pray for those who persecute you."* (Luke 6:28) Pray for God to bless that person. For your sake, for their sake, and for the sake of God's kingdom, ask God to help you love that person.

**Step #2 is represented by the letter E which stands for EMPATHIZE.** **EMPATHIZE** with that person; put yourself in their shoes, and try to see things from their perspective. Try to figure out why they behaved the way they did. Peace with that person will only come when we begin to understand what made them do what they did. Maybe they were acting out of fear. Maybe they were acting out of desperation. Maybe they were acting out of loneliness and sorrow. Maybe they were acting out of misinformation and confusion. Maybe they were acting out of good intentions that back fired on them. The steps to peace will necessitate the ability to empathize with that person.

**Step #3 is represented by the letter A which stands for ACT.** It will be necessary for us to **ACT** differently toward our enemies if we want to arrive at peace with them. We can't just go on freezing them out of our lives. Jesus said, *"Do good to those who hate you."* (Luke 6:27) We have to take action. What will that mean for you? Reach out to the person or persons you harbor resentment toward? Go out of your way to be kind to them? Go out of your way to do something good for them. Don't stay stuck in your anger. Take action. Do something helpful for them. Say a kind word to them. Reach out a

welcoming hand to them. Jesus said, *"Bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you."* (Luke 6:28)

**Step #4 is represented by the letter C which stands for CONFESS.** This is the really big step. Confess your feeling to God. Ask Him to forgive you for your part in the conflict and ask Him to forgive you for the way you have cut that person off and the anger and resentment you have harbored toward them. We need to ask God's forgiveness for the way we have failed to forgive others, for the way we have harbored resentment and hatred toward another. If that other person is a believer, we are commanded by our Lord to go to that person talk things out. Jesus said, *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."* (Matthew 18:15) It's not easy to do this. And it should never be done without first praying. This is the hardest step in the process of making peace with someone who has hurt you. But peace will not come until this step is taken. Proverbs 28:13 says, *"He who conceals his sins does not prosper..."* We have to confess to God and to one another.

**Step #5 is represented by the letter E which stands for EMULATE.** We are to emulate the character of Jesus Christ. We are to emulate the nature of Christ. The Bible tells us, *"Be imitators of God therefore as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Our Lord Jesus Christ died an agonizing death at the hands of his enemies yet he did not harbor hatred in his heart toward them. He actually asked his heavenly Father to forgive them. The leading evangelical pastor of our time is often considered to be John Stott of Great Britain. Listen to what he says about what Jesus modeled for us. He says, **"Jesus seems to have prayed for His tormentors actually while the iron spikes were being driven through His hands and feet. Indeed, Jesus kept praying and kept repeating His pleading, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!'"** This is what we are to emulate, for this is the way to peace. Jesus prayed for his tormenters. He forgave his tormenters and through this he found peace. We, too, must forgive our enemies in order to experience personal peace.

These are the steps to peace: Pray, empathize, act, confess and emulate. These steps will enable us to make peace with our enemies and thereby attain the peace we need to live the far better life. That's the challenge for each and every one of us. May God give us the grace to accept the challenge.