

### LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

by Clarence Jordan

*For many years before Clarence Jordan's death in 1969, he was a leader of Koinonia Farm, a Christian community in southwest Georgia dedicated to living out the way of Jesus. Jordan was a southerner, with the dialect and lore, the gentle manner and rippling humor of the South flowing through his veins. He was a scholar with a doctor's degree in New Testament Greek, as well as a degree in agriculture. The clear witness of Koinonia Farm against race prejudice made it the object of hostility in the 1950s. For several years Jordan, his family, and his friends witnessed shootings, beatings, and an economic boycott. In the late 1960s, Koinonia turned its attention from farming to low-income housing; the 194 homes that the community built from 1969 to 1992 were sold to families with 20-year, no-interest mortgages. In recent years, Koinonia has produced a community for international refugees and a ministry to those in prison. In this 1972 article, Jordan explores the power of nonviolence.—The Editors*

**“Y**ou have heard that it has been said to the old-timers, ‘Take an eye for an eye, and take a tooth for a tooth.’ But I want to tell you all, never resist evil with evil. But whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other. (I have found it even better, if someone slaps you on the right cheek, to turn to him both heels, but....) And whoever wants to go to court with you to take away your shirt, let him have your undershirt. And whoever makes you go a mile, go with him two. Give to everybody who asks, and don't turn your back on the guy who wants to borrow from you.

“You all have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I want to tell you, ‘Love your enemy, and pray for those who try to do you in, so that you may be [children] of your spiritual Father; for He makes His sun to rise upon the wicked and the good, and He lets His rain fall upon the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love only those who love you, what's your advantage? Don't even *beatniks* do that? And if you greet only your brothers [and sisters], what is your distinctive? Don't even uncommitted people do as much? Now you, you people must be mature, just as your spiritual Father is mature’” (Matthew 5:38-48, Cotton Patch Version).

Beyond all doubt, [humanity's] most vexing problem, from prehistoric times to the present, has not been to pass a final examination, has not been to get a degree, a high salaried job, to marry a beautiful girl [or boy] and get a slick car and live in a swanky house in the suburbs. Those problems are but trivia in comparison to the problem of learning how to respond maturely to those who oppose us. We have learned how to respond to our friends. But to respond to our enemies, ah, that is the problem! How can we be mature? How can we make a grown-up response to people who want to do us in, to hound us, to beat us, to persecute us? We would expect our Lord to be quite clear in his teachings on this subject, and he was.

He begins by going deep back into history, and digging up various responses that [people] have made. All of us respond in one of four ways:

1. One is the method of *unlimited retaliation*. Somebody knocks out your eye, you knock out theirs. If somebody knocks out your tooth, knock them all out (if you can get to them). If they kill your dog, you kill their cow; if they kill your cow, you kill their mule; if they kill your mule, you kill *them*. No limit to the amount of retaliation:

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unbridled anger, unbridled vengeance.

[Humanity] seems early to have outgrown this idea, but has lapsed back into it with the invention of the atom bomb. This seems to be the principle that dominates the State Department, that dominates most of the so-called “civilized nations”: ‘You bomb us, we’ll obliterate you. You bomb a little city, we’ll annihilate a whole nation.’ Unlimited, massive retaliation.

Now this was so childish, so barbaric, so beastly, that it never occurred to our Lord that anyone within his hearing would ever resort to it—he just didn’t know 20th century [humans]!

2. Jesus picked it up there and said, “Now wait, if somebody knocks out your eye, don’t knock both of their eyes out.... The old prophet, Moses, said, ‘*One eye for an eye, one tooth for a tooth.*’ If they knock out your eye, don’t knock out both eyes, just knock out one. If they knock out your tooth, don’t knock out all of their teeth, just knock out one tooth.” This was the first effort at *restraint on the strong*. Now he says, “Moses gave you that idea, but it is not enough; let’s us move on up to another one”:

3. And so the old prophet came along and said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” This was the first glimmerings of *limited love*. If your neighbor knocks out your tooth, forgive them; but if they’re a person of another race or another nation, give them the works. In other words limit your love to your own little group, your own nation, your own race. This is the rule of limited love.

This concept enables [people] to live together as a nation, limiting their love to their *own* nation, but it does not enable them to live together as a world family. Now, this seems to be the place that most of us really are today. We love America, and limit our love to the shores and boundaries of the United States.

I think most of us reflect the idea that is inscribed on an old tombstone down in Mississippi, “Here lies John Henry Simpson. In his lifetime he killed 99 Indians and lived in the blessed hope of making it 100 until he fell asleep in the arms of Jesus.” Now Indians don’t count—99 of them. You can live “in the blessed hope” of getting just one more, and round it off to get an even 100, and still “fall asleep in the arms of Jesus.” But if you had killed just one white [person], you’d fall asleep in a noose. “It’s all right to kill Indians, because we don’t care about Indians, but you’d better not kill a white [person].”

So a nation can drop an atom bomb on brown people, the other people, and annihilate two whole cities of people and we give *them* the Congressional Medal. If they kill one [person] in the United States, we give them the electric chair. “Love your neighbor, those of your own race, your own group.”

Down in Georgia some kids, working in the civil rights movement, ran out of gas. They were an integrated group. They were out in the country and two of the white ones decided to go for some gas. They came out to a farmer, and he got them out a gallon of gas, and said, “Where’s your car?”

“Out there” (pointing).

“Well get in. I’ll take you up there.”

“Oh, no, we’ll just walk.”

He said, “Why, no, it’s too hot. I wouldn’t think of letting you walk. Get in.”

“No,” they said, “we’d rather walk. We need the exercise!”

“Well,” he said, “no, it’s too hot. Get in. I’ll take you up there.” So, very reluctantly the two white kids got in with this white farmer, drove along, and finally he said, “Where’s your car?”

“Oh, over there it is.” They stopped and got out. Then the farmer realized that it was some of those integrationists. He became infuriated; he grabbed his can and put

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it in his car and drove off in a huff. If they had been white, he would have been a fine Southern gentleman, a deacon in the Baptist church, “asleep in the arms of Jesus.” But now he’s dealing with people of a *different* race, and he can’t love these people.

4. Jesus said it’s not enough to limit your love to your own nation, your own race, your own group. You must respond with love even to those who hate you.

This concept enabled [people] to live together, not as nations, but as the human race. We are now at the stage of history where we will either take this step or perish.

We have learned with consummate skill to destroy [humanity]. We have learned how to efficiently annihilate the human race. But somehow or another, we shrink with horror from the prospect, not of annihilation, but of reconciliation. We shall either be reconciled, we shall either love one another, or we shall perish.

Now, Jesus was not advocating passive resistance. He doesn’t say, “If your enemy slaps you on the right cheek, put on a demonstration, protesting your rights to preserve at least the rouge on that particular cheek.” He did not command us to demand our rights: The only right that love has is the right to give itself. Now this at times may be passive; that is, you may do nothing to a man who opposes you.

I was at the Sumpter County livestock sale some time back, buying some calves that we needed at the farm. I bought them and was just about ready to leave when the town’s arch-segregationist came in. Well, I didn’t want to have a consultation with him at that moment. I kind of shrunk down behind everyone else and looked for a mouse-hole, but couldn’t find one. Finally he came in and looked around and saw me and he came over and stood about two or three feet in front of me and yelled at the top of his voice, even above the noise of the auctioneer, “Here’s that old Jordan fellow, folks. We ain’t killed him yet, but we can kill him now. We got him here by himself.” I started looking for a knot-hole to get through but couldn’t find one. Then he looked at me and raised his voice again and said, “You ain’t nothin’ but a s— —. You ain’t nothin’ but a— —.” Well, he made a positive statement that on my mama’s side I had some canine ancestry! Let’s put it that way. (Now, down where I come from when someone attributes to you that kind of pedigree, you’re supposed to respond. And I felt my fist getting in a position to respond.) And about that time, he used God’s name and called me that kind of an animal, gave me that kind of a pedigree. And then I noticed that, while he didn’t have any teeth, he did have tonsils. And I thought this would be a nice time to perform a public tonsillectomy! But somehow God gave me the power to restrain myself (and the little fellow kept calling me increasingly long names. I didn’t know there were that many species around until he called me those names). Well, he finally gave up and went outside.

And I noticed there was a great big old farmer, sitting next to me. And every time this little fellow would call me one of those names, this farmer would grimace. Finally, this farmer moved over next to me and said, “You know what?” And I thought he was getting ready to pick up where the little fellow had just left off.

I said, “What?” He said, “I want to know how come you didn’t hit that little fellow. You could have beat...you could have really sooped him, with one arm tied behind your back.”

I said, “I think that is a correct appraisal of the situation.” He said, “Well, how come you didn’t hit him?” I said, “My friend, there’s two reasons why I didn’t hit him. One is purely selfish: If I’d have hit that little segregationist, everyone in this sale barn would have jumped on me and mopped the floor with me. And I just don’t want my wife married to a mop. That’s one reason I didn’t hit him. But the real reason was, I’m trying to be a follower of Jesus. He has taught me to love my enemies.” And I said, “Now, while I must confess I had the minimum amount of love for this little fellow at the time, at least I did him no harm.”

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And this old fellow said, “Is this what it means to be a Christian?” I said, “Friend, that isn’t all that it means, but that’s a part of it.” And we sat for a while, talking about being a Christian.

So I might say that it is not merely to not harm our enemy. Somehow or another we must go beyond that. Love is not merely a weapon; it is not a strategy. And it may or may not work. To do good to those who hate you is such stupendous folly that it can’t be expected to work. Love didn’t work for Jesus. No man has ever loved as he loved. But it didn’t “work,” even for him. He wound up on a cross.

And yet it does “work,” if your motive is not to *make* it work. Love works in the home: but, you know, if you say, “It really works to love your wife. If you love her, she’ll darn your socks and bake you a pie every day.” If that is the motive for love, I doubt that your wife will darn your socks and bake your pies. But love does “work.” I think Abraham Lincoln said it so well when one day old Thaddeus Stevens, a very bitter man from Massachusetts who was in the Cabinet.... After the war was over, there was much sentiment in the North to just crush the South. Thaddeus Stevens shared this viewpoint. One day when Mr. Lincoln was advocating binding up the wounds of the nation, forgiveness, and reconciliation, old Thaddeus Stevens pounded the table and said, “Mr. Lincoln, I think enemies ought to be destroyed!” And Mr. Lincoln quietly said, “Mr. Stevens, do not I destroy my enemy when I make him my friend?”

In the long run it is the only way that really does work. For when the cards are all in, and the final chapter of history is written, when time is rolled out as a garment, and God is All and in all—in that final day, it will be the peacemakers, not the warriors, who will be called the [children] of God. ■

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