

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Praying for Those You Least Want To

Luke 6:27-31

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Over the course of my life, I have known a few people for whom prayer comes easily. My great aunt was one such person. For the overwhelming majority of her life — more than 75 years — she was a Catholic nun. Prayer was as natural to her as breathing. As a child, I was not always appreciative of this, especially when she would offer the blessing over our Thanksgiving meal. I am pretty sure that no food was ever so blessed as the food that sat before us on a Thursday late in November each year. The food was blessed, we were blessed, the earth was blessed, the hands that tended the earth were blessed, the stores that sold the food were blessed, the trucks that delivered the food to the stores were blessed, the table upon which we would eat the food was blessed, the trees that sacrificed the wood that formed the table upon which we would eat the food was blessed, the leaders of the country were blessed, our friends and neighbors were blessed, our pets and the pets of our friends and neighbors were blessed, the food scraps that might find their way to said pets was blessed. It was a prayer for the ages, every year, so much so that my mother began to give my brother and I a snack — a blessed snack! — before calling everyone to the table so that we might endure the prayer with minimal wiggling.

Prayer came easily to my aunt. It doesn't come easily for everyone. And some prayers are harder than others, no matter who you are.

Jesus was in the middle of his Sermon on the Plain, offering a variety of teachings to his disciples and everyone else who had gathered around to hear, when he laid it out: "I say to you who are listening," he said, "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you." Praying for those you least want to is, I think, one of the hardest prayers of all. I'm using that phrase, praying for those you least want to, as a bit of a summary statement. Christian interpreters as early as Clement of Alexandria and Justin Martyr, around the year 150, did the same, as did Martin Luther, John Calvin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and countless others. Because looking at that instruction in the larger context of Jesus' teachings, it seems to be addressing our posture toward not just those who persecute us or mistreat us, not just those who actively wish harm against us, but any person or group with whom we have a bit of friction. Anyone who, before encountering, we might find ourselves taking a deep breath. Anyone who, in the interest of avoiding an encounter, we might find ourselves ducking around a corner. Anyone who raises our blood pressure or causes us to grit our teeth. Anyone around whom we find ourselves losing sight of our best, most whole, selves.

Pray for those you least want to, Jesus says. And before we go any further into what that means, I want clarify two things it **doesn't** mean.

Have you ever heard an old Irish saying offered in the form of a prayer? It goes something like this: "*May those who love us, love us. And for those who don't love us, God, may you turn their hearts; and if you do not turn their hearts, God, may you turn their ankles, so we will know them by their limping.*" When Jesus tells us to pray for those we least want to, this is not what he means. There is a form of prayer called imprecatory prayer. The biblical example of this is found in the book of Psalms. Imprecatory psalms are those that express a desire for God to exact revenge upon enemies, those that call down calamity, destruction, and

God's judgement upon others. There are a handful of these psalms, but Psalm 69 is perhaps one of the most direct. "Pour out your indignation," the psalmist beseeches God. "Let your burning anger overtake them. Add guilt to their guilt; may they have no acquittal for you. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living." This sort of prayer, these sorts of imprecatory psalms, is something we'll address all on its own on June 4. In the meantime, be assured: when Jesus tells us to pray for those we least want to, this is not the type of prayer he means. Look again, and see that this instruction comes as part of a series. "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you." Love. Do good. Bless. Pray. There is little doubt that in this teaching, Jesus means for prayer to be positive.

That leads to the other thing this instruction doesn't mean. A call to pray for those we least want to, even a call to pray positively for those we least want to, is not the same thing as allowing yourself to be mistreated. Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you" does not mean endure abuse. It does not mean stay in an unsafe situation. It does not mean you should compromise your own well-being, and if you have ever been taught otherwise, let me be perfectly clear: that sort of interpretation is a perversion of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When Jesus says pray for those you least want to, it is a call to live in ways that reflect the kingdom of God, and in the kingdom of God, everyone's full humanity is respected, honored, and celebrated.

Which is, I suppose, why this teaching is so darn difficult. Because it's not enough to say what it doesn't mean. We also have to wrestle with what it does mean. What it actually does ask of us. What we really are supposed to pray. (This is a good time to remind you that I stand before you not as an expert on prayer but as one who is still learning to pray.)

When I look at Jesus, I see someone who prays for everyone, even those we least expect, even those maybe even he least wanted to. In Jesus, we see someone who prayed for those who pressed thorns into his head and pushed nails into his hands. In the face of those who were trying to destroy his humanity, he refused to let them. They took his life, but he who was fully divine was also fully human, and he held on to his humanity until his final breath. That is how any perpetrator is denied any ultimate victory — we insist on being human. We insist on being humans who are made in the image of God, humans who strive to see the image of God in one another — even in those we'd really rather not. We remember who we are. Sharon Ringe, a scholar of the New Testament, says that for all that Jesus' teachings instruct us about ethics, identity always precedes ethics. The most important thing Jesus teaches us is who God is, and who we are in relation to God. That is the foundation upon which everything else rests.

Years ago, one of my seminary classmates, who was, and almost certainly still is, a much better Christian than me, shared that whenever she is struggling with someone difficult, whether that is someone right in front of her or someone in the news that she's never met, she repeats to herself, over and over again, "Child of the covenant. Child of the covenant. They are a child of the covenant, just like me." I don't remember what class we were in when she shared that, but I have held on her words as one of the most important lessons I learned.

When I am struggling with someone, that becomes my refrain: "Child of the covenant. Child of the covenant. They are a child of the covenant, just like me." It becomes my prayer: "Child of the covenant. Child of the covenant. Help me see them as a child of the covenant." If I understand the text, that is the first step in praying for those we least want to. "Help me see them as a child of the covenant." Because when we see them that way, we cannot help but see them in relation to God. And that is how our prayers can change and expand, even if it is slow, even if it is almost imperceptible. Love your enemies. Pray for those you least want to. It sounds like Jesus is asking the impossible of us. But that's the thing about Jesus. He says some wild things, but he never asks us to do anything we are incapable of doing, hard though it may be to imagine sometimes. Pray for those you least want to. That first step is not even really about them. It's about God. At the heart of it, prayer is always about God. You can pray it this way: "Help me see them as a child of the

covenant. You, God. I believe in you, I trust you, even if I can't trust them. I trust that your grace is big enough for everyone, even this person who is driving me crazy. Even this person who has hurt me, or hurt others. I don't trust them, but I do I trust you, God. I trust that your grace never gives up on anyone. Help me see them as a child of the covenant. Help me see them in relation to you."

The most controversial sermon I ever preached was in January of 2018. The president of the United States had spoken disparagingly of people from Africa and the Caribbean, using language that has no place in this pulpit. In my sermon, I said that no human ought to ever be spoken of that way, because every human is made in the image of God. Every human is a child of God. But if we are to take that seriously, we have to believe it about the people who speak poorly of others, too.

That sermon was not my most popular. And I didn't say it then because I thought it was easy, or because I had it all figured out. I said it because I believed it was the truth of the gospel, and I still believe it is the truth of the gospel. If we allow ourselves to hate someone because they hate us, or if we allow ourselves to hate someone because they hate someone else, we end up becoming part of a vicious cycle, and much like the proverbial hamster running on a wheel, we find ourselves going nowhere, fast. And we miss something of Christ then, because the scandalous truth of the gospel is that Christ shows up in everyone.

And if you can't see it yet? Lean on the words of Jesus. Pray for those you least want to. "Child of the covenant. Child of the covenant. Help me see them as a child of the covenant." It might not change them, but it will change you. That's all any of us can ever really control. And that is our best bet at changing the world. That is our best bet at "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." "Child of the covenant. Child of the covenant. Help me see them as a child of the covenant."