

## Revolutionary Love

Series: Love

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### Me

As we continue this series on Love, I wanted to talk about something that I personally struggled to know how to deal with in on this topic. This is the idea that as Christians we should love everyone. I thought that this meant we had to be lovely, inoffensive, pleasant, agreeable and just generally nice people etc. I didn't know how I was supposed to love everyone and then not get walked all over.

I think I know where it comes from. I dug out my old leavers year book the other day and at the back there are awards. Now, at school I wasn't in the super popular squad but had a great group of friends, I was quite sporty but I wasn't the best at all of them like some, I wasn't a prefect, I didn't have scholarship, I wasn't house or vice captain. I also was not the class clown, I wasn't always in detention, I wasn't particularly devious and I didn't have a necessarily negative reputation for anything. I just middle of the road, got my work done, did some extra curricular stuff etc- so I wasn't exactly stand out well known to get many of these awards unlike some of my contemporaries. But I did get one award, one that highlights my struggle of being a loving person and also not taking any rubbish from people. That award was biggest pushover.

[Picture on screen]

Actually as you can see that I was actually runner up! I think that is worse right? I cant even be a pushover wholeheartedly! And to make it even worse - there is a typo in my name! (Did I make a fuss? Of course not I was a pushover)

So you can see why I struggled with the question; How can you be a christian, love everyone, and yet not be a pushover?

I think I got caught up on the myth that we should be gentle meek and mild. I confused with being loving for being "nice" and a people pleaser.

I am not going to talk this morning about how to not be a push over, as many of you in this room wont be as wet as I used to be. But it raises a more important issues that I think we all will struggle with at some point. How can we love people yet stand up for ourselves and others in the face of adversity?

### We

How do we show love to someone when we don't want to? When we feel they do not deserve it? We've heard this series about understanding that we are loved by God, we have heard about loving those who society deems unloveable, about loving our friends and family in a sacrificial way. But maybe during this series on love you have been thinking well this is all well and good but what about showing love to:

- The bully at your school
- That "friend" that keeps making snide and hurtful comments to you
- The work colleague that makes you the subject of all their jokes
- The boss who shouts at you and places unrealistic expectations on you
- The neighbour you keep arguing with

On a wider level, how do we show love to the racists, the bigots, the extremists, the murderers?

How do we love people who have wronged us? How do we love those who have hurt someone we love? How do we love people who with think we shouldn't love. How do we love people that we think deserve punishment for what they did and not love?

How do we love and not get used and abused? How do we love those that are out to harm us without getting harmed? How do we love in the face of adversity?

## God

Jesus gives us really clear instruction on this in the bible. He tells us exactly what we should do in the face of hardship at the hands of another. He gives us example of how we should behave towards others who try to harm us.

In Matthew 5 it says this:

**“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” **Matthew 5:38-42****

At first look this advice from Jesus seems to support the “loving people = being a pushover” theory. But there is far more to this than meets the eye. When we look at the context and the cultural relevance of what he is saying there is so much more we can and should learn from this.

What Jesus is saying here is radical and certainly not passive. Yes he is advocating non-violence but don't mistake this for a lack of power.

Firstly he starts by dispelling the old law they were given; an eye for an eye. This was put in place as a form of justice and self regulation so that the punishment for a crime committed against another person was equal to the crime committed, but not worse. It was to stop people doing worse things in retaliation than had been done to them in the first place. Then he gives these three examples which for a long time I thought were just great examples of being a christian doormat. But not so.

Let's start with the “turn the other cheek” instruction and to do this I am going to need a volunteer to help me demonstrate. I wont hit you I promise. Notice Jesus specifically says “if someone slaps you on the right cheek”; this means it would have been someone using the back of their right hand, their clean hand, and hitting someone on the right cheek. At the time this was a way to humiliate someone, to degrade someone, to show them that they are inferior. If the person who has been hit then turns the other cheek it isn't them saying “please hit me again, you're right I am a terrible person, please walk all over me”. What happens is, when someone turns and presents their left cheek to be hit, this would force the oppressor to have to use their left hand to strike them in the same way again. Now in those days your left hand was the hand for “unclean tasks” so that was not an option; too much of a taboo even for the most cold hearted person. The only option the oppressor would have would be to either slap or punch the person which is only what you would have done with an *equal*.

So you see, turning the other cheek is not saying “walk all over me” it is saying, “I am your equal”. It does not involve retaliation but it also is not being passive. It is standing up for yourself without being malicious to another person.

The next example; “hand over your coat as well”. To give the context again. The poor in those days only had 2 garments; an outer one and an inner one and nothing else. There was a law in

those days that said if you owed someone a debt and you could not pay it they could take your outer garment/coat each day as an IOU. So Jesus says don't just give them the coat like you are required to; give more. But actually he is basically saying, in the face of someone taking your last possession in the world; get naked. This is hilarious. Not only is it not retaliating, not only is it giving more than that is required, it would have brought serious shame on the person calling for the first garment as nudity was a serious social taboo in that culture.

The last example is the source of the commonly used phrase "go the extra mile". The law at the time was that a Roman soldier was entitled to ask a Jew to carry their equipment for them for one mile only. It was humiliating for a Jew to have to do this, they were essentially being treated like pack horses. So what does Jesus say? Go with them two miles! This is generosity in the face of adversity. But it was subversive generosity because it would have actually got the soldier into trouble as he would have violated the social law. It would have resulted in the soldier begging the Jew to stop carrying his things. Thus turning the tables.

So what Jesus is saying here is not 3 steps to being the biggest pushover, its how to show kindness and generosity to those who oppress us but in doing so it is standing up for yourself and standing up to discrimination.

These are a few fantastic examples from Jesus of how we can creatively and effectively take on injustice and oppression in *love* without turning to violence or aggression.

I found this great quote by MLK Jr that I think reflects what Jesus is talking about in this passage well, he said it during a speech following the Montgomery bus boycott; a great example of a non-violent way of standing up to oppression:

"The real goal is not to defeat the white man, but awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority. The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community where all men would treat each other as brothers and equals." - **Martin Luther King Jr**

The end goal when we are faced with people that wrong us is reconciliation and redemption. It is realising we are all human beings, we are all children of God. It is not retaliating, not seeking vengeance and therefore not escalating the negativity, not perpetuating the injustice.

Through learning about this passage I am utterly convinced now that by being a Christian and following in the footsteps of Jesus it does not mean we have to be pushovers (or the second biggest pushover).

But this isn't the end of what Jesus tells us to do in the face of hardship at the hands of another.

Jesus goes on to say in the next verse:

**"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" Matthew 5: 43-44**

You

So we have heard about how to stand up to injustice and not be push overs. I think last verse though, gives us some really challenging but practical application points.

Jesus says we also need to; (1) love our enemies and (2) pray for those who persecute us.

So firstly how can we love our enemies?

We can choose to respond with love and not react with retaliation.

I have a great little example of how this can work and I wish I could claim it as my own because it was genius. When I was 18, me and a few friends put our new legal status into action by finally being allowed to go out to bars and clubs in London. We got all dressed up and found ourselves in this bar with a load of pool tables. We ended up playing pool but for some reason one of my friends saw another girl in the bar and took a disliking to her. She spent the whole of one of our games going round to different girls in our group talking about how this girl was dressed too provocatively (she used more offensive words than that) and that she was flirting so overtly that it was shameful (again she used some other choice words that I can't use in this environment). This girl that was the focus of my friends' malice began to realise that she was being talked about. Mainly because my friend made it painfully obvious by glaring at her, whispering and laughing to our friends who were awkwardly trying to change the subject. Sometimes she even pointed. It was so so awkward.

I would love to tell you that I stood up to my friend and told her that I wasn't going to listen to her any more, that the other girl had done nothing to her and she was being rude and horrible and I didn't want to carry on being around her if she was going to continue. But I didn't; I was a pushover remember.

Instead something better happened and it had me frozen to the spot. The girl my friend was being horrible about came towards us. For a minute I thought I was about to see a cat fight brawl start in this bar. I thought this girl was going to come over and deck her; but instead she did something far greater; she said hello. She told my friend how much she liked her outfit, she engaged her in conversation. My friend was gobsmacked and it completely diffused the situation.

This act of kindness in the face of malice highlighted to my friend how rude she had been. It showed her how unprovoked it was but then it forced her to respond back with courtesy. Deep down my friend wasn't a cruel person, she just had major issues with insecurity. She was particularly insecure in that environment and felt she had to put someone else down in order to make herself feel better. But that girl coming over to her and engaging her caused her to find that goodness in herself. No retaliation, no aggression but a very effective act of love.

You see the thing is; love brings out the best in people. Responding with love in the face of offence can highlight the injustice and help people discover their humanity. It's hard to continue to be horrible in the face of love and kindness.

So to respond with love we need to put aside our own desire to take offence and retaliate, we need to put aside our desire to repay like for like. This only perpetuates and exacerbates. We need to take a split second and think; this person may be having a bad day, they may be going through something really challenging, they may have had a seriously tough life even. They may have inadvertently harmed or offended you, they may have intentionally done it, either way it is coming from a place of brokenness and our response should be the same; love.

I like to take a split second and remind myself when faced with a situation when someone is being horrible to me and tell myself:

*Everyone is fighting their own battles and sometimes we can get caught in the crossfire.*

There is an incredible organisation that if you're friends with me on facebook you may have seen some of the things I've shared about them. They are called 'Preemptive Love'. They work on the ground in Iraq and Syria doing whatever they can to help this war torn region. Their aim is to show the love of Jesus in a practical way in the face of violence. They have a motto: "Love anyway"

which I think beautifully sums up what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 5. In the face of adversity, respond with love regardless of what has happened to you.

Remember this doesn't mean you have to be walked all over as we talked about earlier, it doesn't mean to have to keep yourself in harms way; but it does mean we shouldn't retaliate. We shouldn't lower ourselves to the level of the fight. We need to be creative and clever about standing up for ourselves and others against injustice but we do this as well as loving anyway.

When you get a snide comment; love anyway. When you get shouted at; love anyway. When someone betrays you; love anyway. When someone deliberately tries to provoke you; love anyway. When someone disrespects you; love anyway. When you come face to face with cruel or maybe even evil people; love anyway.

Why? Because loving anyway brings out the best in people. It is not saying "i condone your behaviour" it is communicating that we see their value as a human being and a child of God *in spite* of what they have done. That is powerful. That is transformative. That is the love of Jesus.

The second thing that Jesus tells us to do in the face of injustice and adversity is to pray for our enemies. I think the most important thing about praying for your enemies is actually not just the impact it has on them but the impact it has on you. When you pray for your enemies it changes how you feel about them.

Try it! As prayer increases the hate or anger decreases. You might start of prayer "Lord I pray that you smite them down with your wrath of justice]" or something like that. But then you move on to things like "I pray they see what they are doing is wrong". As you continue to pray you start to think about more things to ask of God, you begin thinking more about that person and their situation, your heart softens, you begin to realise their humanity, that they must be fighting their own battle. You will find it very hard to harbour hate for someone you pray for like that.

One of the blogs I read from Preemptive Love said:

"I don't have a choice on who makes me their enemy but I do have a choice in making them mine."  
**William K. Gravely.**

We can help ourselves make this choice by doing as Jesus says and praying for those who persecute us.

So this is a real challenge; love anyway and pray for those who hurt us. Its easy to fall into the trap of thinking this is weak, but actually it takes far more courage and strength than retaliation with verbal or physical aggression.

Us

I haven't told you this yet but I have titled this message "Revolutionary Love" and for good reason. I believe that if we all caught this we could start a revolution, a dramatic change in how we do things, how we relate to one another, a change in the atmosphere and environment of our city and our nation.

Love anyway; this kind of love is contagious and it brings out the best in people. Loving anyway breeds forgiveness, it breaks the cycle of hurt, it brings reconciliation instead of retaliation, it builds community, it brings out the best in people and it points them to Jesus. It places value on people and communicates the love of a saviour to a broken world.

If we all “love anyway” we could see an end to vengeance, violence and retaliation. We could see even the most seemingly evil people turn from their old ways in the light of being shown their value through being responded to with love.

If we see more and more people join the “love anyway” revolution; friendships would blossom, families would be restored, working environments would be more supportive, businesses would flourish, schools and colleges would have fewer bullying issues, poor self-esteem would decrease and along with it low mood/anxiety/self harm, crime rates would fall and cycles of hate would be broken.

The Love Anyway Revolution starts with you and me, deciding to love anyway, pray for those who hurt us and through that we can find creative ways to stand up to injustice.

So let's start a revolution.

### The Call

The greatest act of undeserved love was what Jesus did on the cross. You see, because of sin, all the stuff that we do or have done wrong, that separates us from God - that makes us undeserving. Whether it's a little white lie or murdering innocent children; all of it means we could not be in the presence of a perfect God. We did not deserve his love, we were not fit to be in his presence.

But Romans 5:8 says “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

This ultimate act of loving anyway brings out the best in all of us...

This act of love says not only do we not get what we do deserve, we get what we don't deserve - blessing, all that we need, a hope and a future.

Jesus' love is transformative, it calls us to something more, it causes people to turn from their old ways and into something better, it calls us to live beyond what we are capable of, to live for a cause greater than ourselves.

I want to offer you the opportunity this morning to connect with Jesus; if you don't know this love yet but want to...

Dear Lord Jesus,  
As I stand here tonight, I open up my life to you.  
I thank you for your forgiveness.  
I thank you for your love.  
I believe in you, Jesus, as my Lord and Saviour.  
I am now a Christian.  
And from this day onwards, I will follow you.  
Amen.