

'Conflict and Persecution', , August 1st, Jesus Lifestyle (9), Matthew 5:43-47
Matthew 5:43-47, Acts 7:44-8:4.

Father send your Holy Spirit, to teach us, as we dive into the Bible would you awaken our hearts, expand our minds and shape my identities and lives today.
We want to live a Jesus shaped life... Amen.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
You know if we were listening and we thought the past verses were tough going, the challenges keep coming in! Conflict and loving our enemies!

Conflict.

Personally, I don't find conflict easy.

To be honest, our Western upbringing and culture generally does not prepare us to deal well with conflict.

Each of us has a 'way of doing conflict' but it is not a permanently fixed one, change can come. But the earliest influences in our lives are often the strongest ones because the patterns we learned first are the hardest to unlearn...

How has your background shaped how you see conflict or feel about it?

How we do conflict will be also shaped by our cultural patterns.
I have heard a number of times, how direct the Dutch are. And usually the Dutch smile at this point.

But you know, the directness can be hard for people of other cultures, like eg British or Australian, where such directness is not common and so *it feels* like conflict! But for someone Dutch, conflict is not intended, it is being direct.

It is worth considering *have you ever experienced conflict simply due to a culture clash between you and someone else?*

Is all conflict wrong? What is conflict?

Carolyn Schrock-Shenk said : "Conflict is the tension we experience when a difference is discovered."
So a good question to ask – *why does that difference cause tension in me?*

Our attitude to conflict? A few thoughts...

1.Conflict is normal in life, and will remain with Christians and the church until the end of time. Even in the first weeks of the church – Stephen is brought into ministry, because of conflict over food provision for the church widows. Conflict is not a '100 years after Jesus ascended' problem. This was happening in the first weeks or even months of the early church.

2.Conflict feels like a crisis. But a theologian shared that the Japanese character for crisis, is a combination of the characters for danger and opportunity. We can experience a conflict like a crisis, it is a point where threat / danger, and opportunity meet.

3. Conflict may be a sign that people care – if no one cared about anything there would be no conflict!

4. Jesus, and his brother James repeated: Blessed are the peacemakers ...

5. We can grow in our effectiveness in handling conflict creatively and positively.
But conflict does always have the potential to hurt, and destroy.

Our attitude towards conflict may influence how we view the person with whom we are in conflict with. We may see them as an enemy – a threat / danger – or someone creating an opportunity. If conflict creates stress within us, we tend to see that person in a negative light. If conflict can be seen, on occasions at least, as an opportunity, we tend to be glad they did that, asked that...

Jesus and conflict and persecution.

When Jesus spoke, he is teaching his disciples, we hear, as someone said, ‘the essence of the ethics of Jesus.’ (Bosch, Transforming Mission, p.69).

When we come to the end of the gospel, we are on another hillside overlooking Galilee. Jesus says: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I commanded you. And sure I am with you always until the very end of the age.”

So when Jesus says, “teaching them”, it includes what we hear in the Sermon on the Mount and so this is to be passed onto others. What we hear about conflict and how to act towards enemies, was something Jesus intended to be worked out across his worldwide church.

The gospel began saying the birth of Jesus fulfils the promise in Isaiah of Emmanuel, God being with us. At the end of the Gospel, Jesus declares, he will be with us until the end of the Age. He is with us by the Spirit.

And that means, as he teaches about conflict, about loving enemies, he is also with us in those difficult situations,
we are not alone...

When he shares the Beatitudes, the conditions his disciples will find themselves in, some must have sounded deeply encouraging, others sounded like Jesus values were totally the opposite of the world’s values. Then he says: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” It must have been a little disconcerting. Conflict, persecution will come due to their following of Jesus.

Depending on when the Sermon took place, the disciples may have already seen or experienced the growing opposition to Jesus. They may have seen enemies. When you read Mark’s Gospel, towards the end of Mark 2, there is opposition to Jesus, and then in 3:6, it says “the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” So near the start of Jesus ministry. Perhaps the disciples themselves had come across it because they kept company with Jesus.

Jesus warned them much later in John 15:20 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

Jesus says: "I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

In what is called Sermon on the Plain, a different message, different location, in Luke 6, Jesus says: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill treat you.' Jesus words in Luke 6 help us consider what he has in mind.

Love your enemies.

We heard Jesus speak about enduring evil. Now Jesus goes further – we are not only to refrain from treating him as he has treated us, but actively we are to engage in heart-felt love towards him or her.

What does this love for enemy – or love for neighbor, as love for enemies is within it – look like: Bless, do good, prayer for your enemies. Or you could say – our love is expressed in our words, deeds and our prayers.

Bless them that persecute you.

If our enemy starts to curse us, Jesus says our reaction – 'to lift up our hands and bless him.' We use our words positively towards them, and desire God to bless them, to do good things to them.

Do good to those who hate you.

We must love not only in words or thoughts – but in deeds. Paul says in Romans 12:20 – If your enemy is hungry feed him, if he is thirsty give him something to drink..." Love is service - practical humble, sacrificial. Stott: "Our enemy is seeking our harm, we must seek his good. For that is how God has treated us." Stott, p.118. Those wonderful words in Romans 5:10 "when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son."

If he, our God, gave himself – in action, he didn't just talk about it – for his enemies, we must give ourselves for ours...

Pray for those who ill-treat you.

Bonhoeffer says "this is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side and plead for him to God."

Pray for those who ill-treat you. What do you pray for an enemy? That they would stop causing conflict? Maybe that they would change as a person? Jesus asks a lot of us: "pray for those who persecute you that you *may be sons of your Father in heaven.*" You are praying they would become fellow believers.

Currently Nigeria is no 9 in the world watch list - it is the ninth hardest country in the world to be a Christian. This year, in Nigeria, one NGO has assessed: 3462 Christians were murdered for their faith between Jan and 18th July. That is just under the number of Christians - 3530 - killed for their faith, in Nigeria, in the whole of 2020.

Years ago I was deeply challenged when I read a letter written by the Nigerian Anglican Bishops asking the wider Anglican church to pray. Top of their prayer list were the names of the senior top leaders of Boko Haram, and the first prayer point was for them to come to Christ. That is what Jesus is pointing to.

This is radical. Praying for a persecutor to become a fellow believer.

Radical today. But then just as much. In the ancient world, males were brought up to see honour and influence in the society *around them*. So, if your honour was challenged, the only honourable response in their culture was, to retaliate. So turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give your coat – that already was going against cultural norms and how they were brought up. But in the family, in ancient times, these values were inverted – the brothers were raised to give honour freely to all their siblings and to not respond in kind to any honour challenge from any member of the family, whether male or female.

“In striking contrast to the family values of modern Western culture, in the ancient Mediterranean world, the tightest unity of loyalty and affection was experienced in the sibling group of brothers and sisters, rather than in the emotional bonds of marriage.”

In the teaching of Jesus and later Paul, Christian family is not blood ties, but the relationship to Jesus Christ. So what ancient society saw as the deepest commitment – between siblings - Jesus and Paul apply to the Christian community. You note the numbers of times, Paul is mentioning brothers / brothers and sisters in his letters.

So Jesus says – pray for the one who persecutes you so that you may become –sons of your Father in heaven – fellow Christians – but that meant, praying to have such a depth of a relationship between you and your enemy - that you would become brothers or sisters in Christ.

Bonhoeffer is right, when he suggests, that you not only pray for them to become your brother or sister in Christ, we can pray other things for them. If we pray for them, we take their suffering, hatred, pain, their guilt and we plead to God for them. We stand in the gap, as Ezekiel says. We are doing vicariously for them what they cannot do for themselves. Every insult they give, it only binds us more closely to God, and more closely to them – we pray for them. To quote Bonhoeffer once more : “Their persecution of us only serves to bring them nearer to reconciliation [become sons of the Father] and to further the triumphs of love.” Bonhoeffer, Cost, p.134.

It is true, it is impossible to pray for someone without loving them, and it is impossible, I believe, to go on regularly praying honestly for them without discovering our love for them begins to grow and mature. However we do not wait to feel some love in our heart before praying - we pray even when we feel nothing.

In such actions, we follow the path of Jesus. As someone said, “his injunction to love our enemies ... more than any other command, reflects the true nature of Jesus’ boundary-breaking ministry.” Bosch, Transforming Mission, p.69.

Jesus for the sake of his enemies went to the cross, and he prayed for them as he hung there. We may say that this is something only that Jesus could do. But as we heard, Stephen, a young man, violently attacked, stoned, being killed, and yet prays “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Paul echoes Jesus teaching. He tells the Corinthians – “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it.”

Be Perfect

Having exhorted us, Jesus then asks, do we love like everyone else does or do we love like God. "Be perfect therefore as your heavenly father is perfect." God's people, at the start of Lev 19, where God declares 'love your neighbour', they are told 'be holy because I the Lord your God am holy.'" Yet here the Christian is called to be perfect, not to be holy. The context shows the perfection is about love – the perfect love of God which is shown to those who do not return it. Again as Romans says: ""Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners Christ died for us." In Luke 6, Jesus says 'be merciful even as your Father is merciful.'" We are called to be perfect in love, that is to love even our enemies with the merciful, the inclusive love of God."

Bertrand Russell was a British philosopher. He was raised a Christian, but later adopted atheism. He was familiar with the teachings of Jesus. In 1945 he wrote "The Christian principle, 'love your enemies is good ... There is nothing to be said against it except that it is too difficult for most of us to practice sincerely."

He was right – for he was thinking of himself, and that, in his mind, he would remain who he was inwardly, while trying to love his enemies as time went by.

What he struggled with was the struggle of the Pharisee –

"the Pharisee takes as his aim to keep the law,[to do the right thing] instead of becoming the person whose deeds naturally conform to the law." (Willard, p.205).

What do we need to do? As we repent, believe and trust in Jesus, we become spiritually alive, we receive the Holy Spirit within us, and as Paul shares, the Spirit begins to pour out the love of God into our hearts – into the core of who we are. We are new creations and we are being changed. At times our hearts may flow from that love of God within us towards our enemies and those we are in conflict with. Other times, we need to take that step, to bless, to do good, to pray for them. Often we need to cry out, like in Psalm 123, for help from the Lord to bless, to do good, to be able to pray. As we love our enemies, we demonstrate whose sons and daughters we are...

To be persecuted because of righteousness is to be in the same company as the prophets of the OT, But to bless and pray for those who persecute, that is reflect the character of God...

Paul said: "Be imitators of God therefore as dearly loved children and live a life of love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer wrote in the late 1930s; he could see where Nazism was leading things, when enemies of the church were gathering... He quotes a theologian, called A.F.C Vilmar, from 1880.

The words that have challenge and resonance today.

" This commandment we should love our enemies and forgo revenge, will grow even more urgent in the holy struggle that lies before us ...

The Christians will be hounded from place to place, subjected to physical assault, maltreatment and death of every kind. We are approaching an age of wide-spread persecution ...

Soon the time will come when we will pray ...

It will be a prayer of earnest love for these very sons of perdition who stand around and gaze at us with eyes aflame with hatred, and who have perhaps already raised their hands to kill us ...

Yes the Church which is really waiting for its Lord, and which discerns the signs of the times of decision must fling itself with its utmost power and with the armour of its holy life, into this prayer of love.”
Villmar quoted in Bonhoeffer, Cost, p.136.

Our closing prayer – is an ancient one...

*“Thanks be you thee my Lord Jesus Christ,
For all the benefits and reconciliation thou has given to me
For all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
Give me afresh your Holy Spirit, that
I may know thee more clearly
Love thee and others more dearly
And follow thee more nearly,
Day by day. Amen.*