



Love Your Enemies

WARREN CARTER

A group of colleagues has spread a rumor about you. The rumor is totally false. Yet if it is believed, it is the end of your career. “They” have performed a hateful and violent act. You feel sabotaged and betrayed. What to do? Retaliate with rumors about them? Damage them professionally and/or personally? Confront? Seek reconciliation? Seek disciplinary action and their dismissal? Seek legal action? Absorb the attack?

Or your country is attacked and thousands die. How does your country, which has deep roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, respond? Absorb the attack? Retaliate? Seek dialogue with the attackers? Address underlying issues contributing to the hostility?

What would Jesus say?

JESUS ON ENEMIES

There is broad consensus that Jesus instructed his followers to love their enemies.¹ Rudolf Bultmann included this saying among that which is “characteristic of the preaching of Jesus,” because these sayings “contain something characteristic, new, reaching out beyond popular wisdom and piety and yet are in no sense scribal or rabbinic nor yet Jewish apocalyptic.”² Bultmann’s use of the criterion of dissimi-

¹For one exception, E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 263: “I am inclined to reject the entire section, Matt. 5.17–6.18, except for the prayer (6.9–13).”

²Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 105.

Jesus’ command to “love your enemies” is recognized as an authentic saying of Jesus, one that calls disciples in every age to imitate both God’s merciful love for enemies (Luke 6:36) and God’s own perfection (Matt 5:48).

larity³ to establish the saying's authenticity, though, while followed by some,⁴ has been rightly questioned. Studies have shown that the sentiment is not unique to Jesus but is present in various forms in Hellenistic philosophers⁵ and in Jewish literature.⁶ William Klassen concludes that "the ultimate source of the idea, although not in commandment form, can be traced to ancient Greek wisdom but above all to Judaism from whence Jesus derived it."⁷ While Klassen's conclusion seems well-sustained, we should not, though, think that this sentiment represents most treatment of enemies in the ancient world. Susan Mattern establishes that in administering its empire Rome knew well how to hate, humiliate, and destroy enemies.⁸

While the saying's authenticity cannot be established by the criterion of dissimilarity, other criteria have established its authenticity. One criterion involves its compatibility with "love for enemies" material in Judaism, as noted above. The Jesus Seminar noted its striking aphoristic style and culturally distinctive (though not unique) content: "The admonition 'love your enemies' is somewhere close to the heart of the teachings of Jesus....The injunction to love enemies is a memorable aphorism because it cuts against the social grain and constitutes a paradox."⁹ A further criterion, coherence, recognizes that this command coheres with such material as Matt 5:38–42 (Luke 6:29–30) forbidding retaliation and violent action, with the so-called Golden Rule in Matt 7:12 (Luke 6:31), and with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37, judged authentic [red] by the Jesus Seminar).¹⁰ It is too much of a stretch, though, to argue for multiple attestation on the basis of parts of Rom 12:9–21.

Given the saying's authenticity, what might the historical Jesus have meant by this instruction? Interestingly, while many assert the saying's authenticity, it often plays little role in reconstructions of the historical Jesus. Fine studies of the historical Jesus by John Dominic Crossan,¹¹ John Meier,¹² and William Herzog¹³ for ex-

³This criterion sought sayings that did not resemble first-century Judaism and early church practices.

⁴John Piper, *"Love your enemies": Jesus' Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and the Early Christian Parables: A History of the Tradition and Interpretation of Its Uses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 64, 91–92.

⁵For example, Epictetus, *Diatribai* 3.22.54; Seneca, *De otio* 1.4; *De beneficiis* 7.30.2, 5.

⁶Exod 23:4–5, Lev 19:16–18; 1 Sam 24:16–20; Ps 7:3–5; Prov 24:17–18; *Letter of Aristeas* 207, 227; *Testament of Gad* 6:1–7; *Testament of Benjamin* 4:2–3; Philo, *Virtues* 116–118; 4 Macc 2:14; 2 Bar 52:6. For discussion, see William Klassen, *Love of Enemies: The Way to Peace* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 27–71.

⁷William Klassen, "The Authenticity of the Command: 'Love your Enemies,'" in *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 395.

⁸Susan Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁹Robert W. Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: MacMillan/Polebridge, 1993) 147.

¹⁰For some discussion, see Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 133–134.

¹¹John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

¹²John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); vol. 3, *Companion and Competitors* (2001).

¹³William R. Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

ample, give it either little or no attention. Ben Witherington's survey of "the third search" for Jesus, covering the work of some twenty scholars of the historical Jesus, does not list either the Matthew or Luke reference in the index.

The question of Jesus' meaning concerns, in part, the referent for "your enemy,"¹⁴ the scope of the verb "love," and the context or contexts for the saying. "Enemies" have been variously identified as Romans (and by extension Gentiles),¹⁵ Galilean village neighbors who cannot repay debts,¹⁶ and opponents of Jesus' followers and outsiders.¹⁷ Another possibility is that the command instructs Jesus' followers how to engage or negotiate Judean and Galilean elites whose societal vision and practices Jesus deems to be at odds with God's purposes. Hans Dieter Betz posits a context of Jewish debates over the interpretation of Scripture, especially the neighbor-love command of Lev 19:18.¹⁸ Another approach would be to locate instances in the gospel traditions where Jesus exhibits love for enemies ("sinners"?) as well as instances where he seems not to extend it (the denunciation of the temple? the eschatological destruction scenes, Matt 24:27–31?).¹⁹

*"the command is not only exaggerated and provocative
but also open-ended and indeterminate"*

The quest to find one applicable situation, however, seems futile. Part of the command's aphoristic quality is not only its exaggerated and provocative quality in questioning everyday expectations concerning revenge or limited love, but also its open-endedness or indeterminacy. Klassen claims "something of a consensus...that it includes personal, national, and religious enemies."²⁰

But while this open-endedness is vital to the saying's ability to "travel" from one context to another, it is also a problem because open-endedness requires elaboration in clarifying what enemy-love might look like in particular circumstances. Or to rephrase it, the very open-endedness of the command invites or perhaps better, requires, discourse about how it engages particular human and societal situations. It is a command in search of elaboration, dialogue, discernment. It provides direction but leaves the itinerary to the travelers.

Not surprisingly, the renderings of the command in Matt 5:43–48 and Luke

¹⁴James Moulder, "Who Are My Enemies? An Exploration of the Semantic Background of Christ's Command," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 25 (1978) 41–49.

¹⁵Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York and Toronto: Mellen, 1984) 130–131.

¹⁶Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 118.

¹⁷Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 272.

¹⁸Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 299.

¹⁹Warren Carter, "Are There Imperial Texts in the Class? Intertextual Eagles and Matthean Eschatology as 'Lights Out' Time for Imperial Rome (Matthew 24:27–31)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003) 467–487.

²⁰Klassen, "Authenticity of the Command," 393; Moulder, "Who Are My Enemies?" 47, reaches a similar conclusion.

6:27–36 offer such elaborations. Opinions are mixed as to how much of this elaboration derived from Jesus and how much developed in the traditioning process. It is sufficient to note here that Matthew and Luke provide the “command plus elaboration.” I will examine each of the elaborations, beginning with Luke, to see how the command is specified and targeted to particular situations.

THE COMMAND IN LUKE 6:27–36

Luke’s pericope begins with the command (6:27ab) and then sets about its elaboration. The command is introduced as Jesus’ authoritative word (“I say”) with direct address in the plural “to you that listen.” Addressed are disciples, identified at 6:20. Luke has used the verb “listen” several times previously to denote those open to and receptive of the divine word (2:20; 5:1).

Luke 6: 27b Love your enemies

The present tense imperative suggests continuing or ongoing love. The plural form, along with the plural pronoun “your” and the noun “enemies,” maintains communal address. The juxtaposition of “love” and “enemies” is striking, in that benefaction²¹ or doing good to an enemy differs considerably from the more conventional practices of revenge, injury, and hate.

Then follow three elaborations:

6:27c do good to those who hate you

6:28a bless those who curse you

6:28b pray for those who abuse you

These three instances elaborate both the meaning of “love” and the category of “enemies.” To love is to do good, to bless, to pray for. These present tense and plural imperatives stipulate continuing ways of living out Jesus’ command of loving enemies. “Enemies” are those who hate (identified as a response to disciples in 6:22), curse, and abuse. It is not specified whether these “enemies” are exclusively outsiders —“the outside world”²²—or other disciples. The lack of specificity perhaps suggests both, though the content of the verbs points more toward outsiders. The personal language of the commands—the thrice repeated “you” plural—continues the direct address of the originating command. The emphasis on unconventional behavior also continues. Disciples are not to return “like for like” practices but are to benefit enemies who do not act in that way toward them. Enemies are to be treated as friends. The reference to “cursing” evokes the world of magic in which spells, the evil eye, and incantations are means of harming another. Instead of matching curse with curse, disciples are to employ liturgical practices of blessing and prayer for the enemies. The type of prayer—whether for divine vengeance, repentance, forgive-

²¹Alan Kirk, “‘Love Your Enemies,’ the Golden Rule, and Ancient Reciprocity (Luke 6:27–35),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003) 667–686.

²²Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 591–592.

ness, conversion, or general blessing—is not specified. The latter four petitions, though, are consistent with the command to love, the elaboration of doing good, and the later theological rationale (6:35f—“for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked”).

Four examples follow the three commands:

6:29a if anyone strikes you on the cheek offer the other also

6:29b from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt

6:30a Give to everyone who begs from you

6:30b and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again

These examples are marked by five characteristics. First, the dominant power dynamic involves one person seeking their own benefit at the expense of the other (what Kirk calls negative reciprocity).²³ This self-benefiting occurs through different means. Three instances involve significant degrees of victimization inflicted by violence, robbery, and confiscation, while the fourth recognizes considerable agency by the one who benefits (begging). But all four benefit one at the expense of another. Second, the examples specify the enemies’ actions. Instead of general references to hating, cursing, and abusing as in the three commands (6:27b–28), the language depicts particular actions: striking on the cheek, taking one’s coat, begging, and stealing. Third, violence marks three of the enemies’ actions, the first two and the last. Fourth, each statement asserts an appropriate but unconventional counter-action. Being struck requires not striking back but offering the other cheek; having one’s coat taken requires not fighting to recover it but giving one’s shirt. These actions reverse the assertions of power, display another form of interaction, and invite the enemies to behave accordingly. Fifth, these counter-actions introduce an element of the bizarre to the examples. They make explicit the surprising counterintuitive, countercultural way of responding inherent in the “love your enemies” command.

“Offering the other cheek does not betoken passivity, weakness, or submission. Rather it is an act of self-assertion that counters the intent to humiliate.”

That is not to say that the exaggeration functions only for rhetorical effect. The examples have a literal “lived-out” dimension. Jesus’ refusal to strike back in the passion narrative, for example, lives out the first example (Luke 22:63–64). Often overlooked in discussions of these examples is James Scott’s work on the covert yet self-protective ways that the powerless protest humiliating actions. Such acts of protest function not to change the system but to preserve and express dignity in the

²³Kirk, “Love Your Enemies,” 677, 682.

midst of systemic and personal degradation. Offering the other cheek, for example, does not betoken passivity, weakness, resigned indifference, or submission, and it will not change the system. Rather it is an act of self-assertion that counters the intent to humiliate and invites the striker to interactions other than violence. Giving one's shirt when one's coat has been taken—as a pledge for a loan? by robbery?—exposes the impact of the violent and exploitative (elite?) action. It diffuses the impact of taking the coat by refusing to value it enough to fight for it. It transforms that violent act by a counterassertion of gifting one's shirt, thereby challenging the other to different practices. Giving to *everyone* who begs—without reciprocity—enacts a different form of human interaction marked by unlimited giving, intended to alleviate suffering rather than enhance the status of the giver. Not asking for one's goods when another has taken them away means not exercising either revenge or whatever option one has of reclaiming them. It turns forcible expropriation into a gift, inviting a similar response.²⁴

Such responses refuse the intended humiliating effect, respond to the act of power or force with an act of gift, and invite similar interaction. They pose questions to and about self-benefiting and costly (elite?) behavior in terms of its impact on others. These four examples stimulate the imagination for disciples to create similar dignity-asserting and “loving,” but not avenging, responses in other instances of humiliation.

After the four examples, the discourse becomes more generalized and positive with the so-called Golden Rule:

6:31 Do to others as you would have them do to you

Betz argues that this verse asserts the principle that underlines the commands of 6:27–28 and the examples of 6:29–30.²⁵ Disciples are to engage others as they themselves wish to be engaged, not doing things that they would not want done to them, and doing beneficial things that they would want done to them. The verse states for disciples a principle of relational interaction marked by benefaction for the other regardless of circumstances and response.

Verses 32–34 employ three rhetorical questions to elucidate the Golden Rule by rejecting a misinterpretation of it. The questions employ the same form, a conditional clause (employing vocabulary from 6:27b, “love,” and 6:27c, “do good”), a question (“what credit is that to you?”), and a declaration that “sinners” do the same:

6:32 if you love those who love you

6:33 if you do good to those who do good to you

6:34 if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive

The misinterpretation, emphatically stated three times in the protases of the conditional clauses, comprises reciprocating behaviors. Verses 32–34 show that the com-

²⁴Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 598.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 599.

mand of 6:31 to “do to others” does not mean common reciprocating behavior or exchanging favors, typical of Greek understandings of friendship.²⁶ Rather, the proper interpretation is stated in 6:35 in three synonymous imperatives using the same verbs as 6:32–34 that emphasize benefaction without the expectation of positive return:

6:35a love your enemies (restating verse 27)

6:35b do good

6:35c lend expecting nothing in return

The first with its surprising direct object, repeating verse 27, restates Jesus’ central point of benefaction not based on exchange of favor. The second defines “love” in terms of indiscriminately “doing good.” The third illustrates the concern with gift. That is, 6:35 makes explicit what the threefold questions/declarations of 6:32–34 implied, urging love for those who do not love, indiscriminately doing good, and lending (gifting) to those who do not repay.

*“as disciples enact Jesus’ command to love their enemies,
do good, and lend without return, they live now the
identity of being ‘children of God’”*

The rest of 6:35 elaborates the consequences and basis for such actions. In 6:35de the “reward” for living this way is announced, namely, a new identity: “you will be children of the Most High.” This covenant language promises intimate relationship with God, the “Great Benefactor.”²⁷ Commonly, the future tense “will be” is understood to denote eschatological reward,²⁸ but several factors suggest that a present focus may also be appropriate. The language of “reward” appears only twice more in the Gospel, in 6:23, where heavenly reward is linked to a time of persecution, and in 10:7, where it denotes a worker’s (present) wages. Moreover, while Luke does not use “children” (lit. “sons”) directly of disciples, in several instances the term does denote the present practices and status of disciples (11:11; 15:11–30). And the future tense language of “will be” can refer to narrative time, not eschatological time, as in 1:31–32, anticipating a subsequent accomplishment in the narrative. That is, as disciples enact Jesus’ command to love their enemies, do good, and lend without return, they live now the identity of being “children of God.”

Such actions denote this identity because they imitate God’s actions among humans and thereby God’s very character.

6:35f for he is kind/benevolent²⁹ to the ungrateful and the wicked

²⁶Ibid., 600.

²⁷Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 274.

²⁸Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 612; Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 275.

²⁹Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 610.

There are two important emphases here. First, God's benevolence extends to all, regardless of their response. This does not mean, as Alan Kirk rightly points out, that God's benefaction is not interested in response: "benefactors seek...to awaken gratitude, create social bonds, and thereby a devoted clientele."³⁰ But it does mean that God's favor is not offered only if it will elicit a positive response or only in response to positive efforts toward God. It is offered regardless of response to enemies, the ungrateful, and the wicked. And second, disciples are to imitate this indiscriminate benevolence offered to all people regardless of response.

The discussion concludes with a positive statement.

6:36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful

The statement sums up the divine character (merciful even to the ungrateful and wicked) and the obligation on disciples to imitate this indiscriminate mercy for all. Interestingly the imitation of God's merciful love for enemies in the merciful actions of disciples maintains the focus on the disciples' present practices as the expression of their being children of God, not on eschatological reward.

THE COMMAND IN MATTHEW 5:43–48

Space limits prevent a lengthy discussion of Matthew's elaboration of the command to love your enemies, and considerable overlap between the two passages renders it unnecessary.³¹ Instead I will highlight several differences between the two passages.

Two significant differences involve Matthew's framing of the saying. Luke's elaboration of the "love your enemies" command follows four beatitudes and woes (Luke 6:20–26), which begin his Sermon on the Plain. Matthew's elaboration, part of the Sermon on the Mount, comes at the end of a unit of six vignettes or examples depicting life shaped by God's empire or kingdom (5:21–48). The previous vignette (5:38–42) that rejects retaliation ("an eye for an eye") and commands nonviolent resistance to evil includes some of the material present in Luke's elaboration (compare Matt 5:39b–42 with Luke 6:29–30). Matthew's previous scenario has already taken up the topic of responding to enemies and has already advocated surprising countercultural practices that do not repay kind with kind. The command to "love your enemies" (5:43) repeats and builds on this material, thereby underscoring its importance and providing further opportunity to elaborate the command.

That elaboration is, secondly, framed in terms of a traditional command to "love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Neither Lev 19 nor any other biblical passage commands hate for enemy (eliminated by Lev 19:17; Exod 23:4–5; Prov 24:17–18; 25:21–22). The reference here (5:43) to a command to hate probably re-

³⁰Kirk, "Love Your Enemies," 683–684.

³¹For elaboration, see Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-Political and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000) 150–157.

flects typical human behaviors as well as debates about the identity of a neighbor and understandings of good and bad friends. Those who do not fulfill the roles of good friends and neighbors are understood to be enemies to whom love is denied.³² Thus the command to hate is presented as a likely misinterpretation and restriction of the neighbor command from Lev 19:18. Jesus' command in Matt 5:44 to "love your enemies," elaborated by similar practices as Luke's, rejects such treatment of enemies. Jesus defines neighbor to include enemies, and love to include prayer for persecutors.

Matthew's theological justification for such treatment follows in 5:45. Like Luke's it involves the identity of disciples in intimate and imitative relationship with God. But in contrast to Luke, God's indiscriminate goodness, not mercy, is the basis for the action. Children of God imitate God's indiscriminate goodness and love for all in their actions, thereby living out of and into their identity as God's children now. God's goodness is expressed in continually making available to all the blessings of creation that sustain life—the sun and the rain (present tense verbs in 5:45). Luke does not employ this argument from creation.

A summary statement ends Matthew's elaboration (5:48). The opening verb can be translated as a command ("be perfect"), a social-ethical consequence (in so living "you will be perfect"), or an eschatological promise ("you will/may be perfect"). While arguments can be made for each form, it seems preferable to recognize the rich multivalency of the statement. Disciples who so live in imitation of God ("as your heavenly Father") are (to be) "perfect" (contrast Luke's "merciful"). The context is the best guide to the term's meaning. God's perfection comprises God's continual and indiscriminate goodness to those who are "evil and good," "just and unjust." In so living, disciples imitate God's perfection.

Recall the scenarios of rumors and violent attacks with which this article began. How are individuals and nations subjected to actions by enemies to respond? Neither Matthew's Jesus nor Luke's Jesus gives us a detailed prescription. The Gospel elaborations of Jesus' command to "love your enemies" prohibit some behaviors (responding in kind) and provide a general direction comprising responses marked not by reciprocity but by indiscriminate love and doing good. Moreover, these canonical elaborations of the command suggest that contemporary disciples seeking to imitate and embody God's ways always have the (communal) task of elaborating them in order to identify specific behaviors for specific circumstances. ⊕

WARREN CARTER is professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas. His new book, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*, is scheduled to appear soon (T & T Clark, 2008).

³²Instructive is the discussion in Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 301–309.