

When is it OK to hate?

Sermon for Sunday, September 9, 2007

Scripture for the Day

[Jeremiah 18:1-11](#)

[Philemon 1-21](#)

[Luke 14:25-33](#)

When I was growing up, there were a few words that my mother absolutely forbade us to use. I accepted these rules, but with my sister around, it was sometimes difficult not to use the word “hate.” For my mother, not saying, “hate” was part of who were as a family. “Hate” is not a nice word.

You probably noticed that the lectionary committee did not include [Psalm 139:19-24](#) in today’s reading. What did they leave out?

“19 If only you, God, would slay the wicked!

Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

20 They speak of you with evil intent;

your adversaries misuse your name.

21 Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD,

and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

22 I have nothing but hatred for them;

I count them my enemies.

23 Search me, God, and know my heart;

test me and know my anxious thoughts.

24 See if there is any offensive way in me,

and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Words translated as “hate” are used quite a bit in the Bible. Bible Gateway (www.biblegateway.com) gives 84 citations for “hate” in Today’s New International Version, 62 in the Old Testament and 22 in the New Testament. It is a comfort that the same search for “love” gives 540 citations, 334 in the Old Testament and 206 in the New Testament. The Bible is mostly about Love! In the Old Testament, God hates evil and those who do evil. As [Proverbs 6:16-19](#) puts it so well:

“16 There are six things the LORD hates,

seven that are detestable to him:

17 haughty eyes,

a lying tongue,

hands that shed innocent blood,

18 a heart that devises wicked schemes,

feet that are quick to rush into evil,

19 a false witness who pours out lies

and a person who stirs up dissension in the community.”

In the Old Testament, “hate” is used to make it clear that God doesn’t just disapprove of bad behavior, he has an “extreme dislike or antipathy” towards sin and sinners. The word “hate” gives the law an emotional edge. In the New Testament, the word “hate” is frequently used to emphasize the intensity of the world’s hostility towards Christ’s followers. Let’s look at the use of “hate” in the Gospel According to [Luke 6:22](#),

“Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.”

And it is predicted that Jesus’ followers will even be hated by members of their own families in [Luke 21:16-18](#),

“16 You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. 17 Everyone will hate you because of me. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish.”

In this context, the advice Jesus gives in today’s Gospel seems less surprising in [Luke 14:26-27](#),

“26 If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself—such a person cannot be my disciple. 27 And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

We have seen that the idea that the righteous will be hated by the wicked and they will return that hatred is common in the Old Testament. However, the idea of being encouraged to hate your own family and even life itself is something new. The teacher of Ecclesiastes, with his bad attitude, hates life, but I don’t think that Jesus thinking along these lines from [Ecclesiastes 2:17-18](#):

“17 So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. 18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.”

This difference in attitude, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, reflects how Jesus fundamentally moved towards a view that saw our relationship with God as extending beyond this life into the Kingdom of Heaven. When the Jews were moving from strength to strength, as God's chosen people, they had a full measure of confidence that God reward goodness and punish evil in this life. When the Psalms ask for God's help in his people winning victory over their enemies, the expectation was that this help would come now, not at the end of days. We tend to remember Job's suffering, but we forget that at the end as said in [Job 42:12-13](#),

“12 The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. 13 And he also had seven sons and three daughters.”

Jesus came to a conquered people, where the “good life” came not from righteousness, but from cooperating with the occupying Romans. Doing well under the Romans was not based on hard work and honest dealing, but on using bribery and political influence to get the right to collect taxes and duties. The Roman economic system was heavily dependent on slavery and was designed to extract the maximum amount of wealth from the vast majority, the poor, to the benefit of a tiny elite and of far-off Rome. For year after year, the enemies of God just got richer and richer.

It is hard to imagine how difficult it was for God's chosen people to cope with this situation. Those who remained steadfast in their faith believed that if the people would just do a better job of following the Old Testament Law, then God would send a Messiah who would throw off the Roman yoke. This course led to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 AD.

Jesus offered an alternative. However, it is hard for us to imagine how radical and unsettling that alternative must have been for those who heard him preach. For Jesus' audience, their family was their social safety net, their security in sickness and old age. In his day, all businesses were family businesses. Your family determined all your position in the community, where you lived, and whom you married. An individual isolated from their family was as good as dead. To reject your family and follow Jesus meant giving up any chance for what the world saw as a decent and respectable life. Giving up your family meant opting out of society's obligations and privileges and depending entirely on Jesus and your new family of fellow believers. It meant dying to success in this life and standing on the promise of a better life in the Kingdom. Jesus was being quite honest—to make this choice, you really have to hate your family and even life itself. Jesus did not mean that we should wish our family ill. Fortunately, Jesus is not saying that we should wish destruction on our families. According to the commentators, when Jesus says “hate,” he means love less, be less attached to. Nevertheless, how can you give up your family and all your possessions, unless you “hate” them?

Jesus said, that to really live, we need to let go of life. It is up to each of us, through prayer and studying the Word, to discern what this means in our lives. Once we have given up the world, we can be our true selves in Christ. Once we stop worrying about getting even or getting ahead, we can really start loving. As Paul said in [Romans 12:9-10](#),

“9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.”

Remember what else Jesus said about hate in [Luke 6:27-28](#),

“27 But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” Amen.

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