

LET YOUR ENEMY WIN!

Text: Romans 9:1-5

You're at the beach with your girlfriend, soaking up the rays when a hulking mass throws a dark shadow across you. The muscle-bound brute snickers at the two chicken wings attached to your torso, then puts his arm around your honey's waist and walks off with her. Are you just going to sit there and cry, or are you going to do something about it? A half century ago you could have turned to Charles Atlas, the world champion body builder who made his fortune transforming wimps into weightlifters. Today you can join a health club and hire your own personal trainer. If that's too much work then you can just pay the lipomagic doctor to scrape away your love handles.

Nobody likes second place. None of us likes getting passed by for the promotion at work, or when our brother or sister gets a bigger piece of pie, nobody cares if you come within 1000 votes of getting elected. And when it comes to our enemies, we want to see them crushed. The good guys punish the bad guys at the end of the movie, the bully gets his head stuffed in the sand, the hero gets the girl.

But it doesn't always go that way, does it? The job doesn't always go to the most qualified person, the guilty escape on technicalities, nice guys finish dead last. We could keep fighting for our rights out of spite, like a washed up NFL quarterback trying to make a comeback. We could accept defeat, but then grouse about it the rest of our lives. Or, we could just keep taking it like a dog that's been kicked its whole life. But I don't think any of those options are going to give us what we're looking for – vindication, validation, victory. No, what we need is a different way of looking at our enemies, a different way of looking at ourselves, a different way of thinking about “winning” and “losing.” We need to put on our Jesus glasses. We need to view our lives through the lens of his cross, his defeat, his victory. Then we'll understand it's OK to let our enemy win! That's because we're really both on the same side. And if our enemy wins, we do too.

1. Because you're both on the same side

We think we're so much different from our enemies, but we really aren't. Whether you'll be cheering this fall for Auburn or Alabama, we all share the same governor and pay the same taxes. We fixate on our spouse's one or two shortcomings rather than the other 98% areas in which we are compatible. Both American soldiers and Taliban insurgents bleed in the same color.

In the same way, the first century Jews weren't so different from the Christians. Jesus was a Jew. The 12 apostles were also Jewish, as were the first Christians. The commandments and promises of the Old Testament belong together with the New Testament. But the Jews didn't see it that way. The Jews persecuted Jesus because they couldn't get past his claim that he was the Son of God. The Jews persecuted Christians, because they felt their way of life was being threatened. The Jews viewed Christians as their enemies.

But the reality is that both Jews and Christians are on the same side. By nature, they are both on the wrong side of God. At various times in the past, one nation or another has claimed that God was on their side as they cut up their enemies into little pieces. But human beings have no right to declare God's loyalties, because we don't live up to his expectations. As the DNA of Adam and Eve carried the genetic code for the whole human race, so also they passed on to us the seeds of our eternal doom – we are all bound to sin, to suffer and to die. By virtue of our birth, we all are God's enemies.

But Jews and Christians are united in something else – they both are recipients of God's grace. By grace, God made 100 year-old Abraham and 90 year-old Sarah the ancestors of the Jewish race. 400 years later as the Jews wandered in the desert, God inserted a bright cloud into the middle of their camp as proof he was with them. At Mt. Sinai, the God signed a contract with the Jews, committing himself to guard and protect them. God set up worship rituals to teach the Jews that their sins could be forgiven through the shedding of blood. By showing the Jews grace, God was really showing grace to all of us. Because if there were no Jews, there would be no Jesus. If there were no Jesus, there would be no sacrifice for our sins, and no hope of eternal life.

How important is it for us to understand that we and our enemies are on the same side? Because of the misguided actions of Christians in the past, many Jews want nothing to do with Jesus. Many people just want the Christians to leave the Jews alone, to stop trying to convert them. In the same way for many Muslims, the bloody Crusades of the Middle Ages have turned Jesus into a devil. Because Christians have not understood they are on the same side as their enemies, some Native Americans link Christianity with genocide, evolutionists view the Bible as unscientific, gays and lesbians can't get past the hateful words of some Christians to see Christ's love for them. They sit on that side of the fence, we sit over here – and there isn't much we do about it, is there? And when we're forced to be around non-Christians we tense up, we lace up our boxing gloves and get ready to fight. We'd rather invite our Christian friends over for supper, listen to Christian talk shows and read Christian books, patronize Christian businesses.

But by isolating ourselves, we isolate others from Christ. Thank God Christ didn't isolate himself from us. Thank God Jesus ate with sinners, so that we could sit at God's table. Thank God that Jesus let his enemies stick it to him, instead of God sticking it to us. God doesn't need our help to crush our enemies – he can handle them himself. Our job is to convince our enemies that we're on the same side – the same side of God's grace. Let your enemy win because

2. If he wins, you do too

If anyone had an ax to grind against the Jews, it was the Apostle Paul. The Bible mentions 15 separate incidents when Jews tried to either get him in trouble with the authorities, or to kill him outright. Why? Because even though Paul was a Jew, his ministry was all about non-Jewish people. Paul opened the door of the church wider than anyone else in the New Testament, and he firmly opposed every effort to make Gentiles follow Jewish customs.

Even though the Jews considered Paul an enemy, he didn't feel the same way about them. In our reading he says, "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel." Maybe it wasn't always obvious to the Jews, but Paul really loved them. His conscience was clear – whenever he went into a town for the first time, he almost always started preaching to Jews. And the Holy Spirit himself confirmed that he gave it his best shot.

Paul's enemies accused him of betraying his own race. But Paul loved his countrymen – he took up a relief collection for the Jews who were starving to death in Jerusalem. Paul loved his Jewish cultural traditions, and to prove it he took a special Jewish vow. He shaved off all the hair on his head, and then presented himself at the temple in Jerusalem. He was doing everything the right way, but his enemies jumped to the conclusion that Paul had brought "unclean" Gentiles into the forbidden zone. A riot started and the Jews would have torn Paul apart on the spot, but a garrison of Roman soldiers rescued him from his countrymen.

Doesn't that make Paul's words here in Romans 9 even more amazing? He didn't complain about the Jews or write them off as hopeless, but he was depressed about their unbelief, it tore him up every day. That's why he never stopped trying to reach out to Jews, even though it meant he'd be assaulted, arrested and abused. Paul was willing to lose everything for the sake of his enemies. He was even willing to give up his place in heaven for the sake of his enemies, although that's not how it works. As Psalm 49:7-8 says, "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him. The ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough." Paul was ready to let his enemies do whatever they wanted to him, because if they were won to Christ, he would win too.

At our denomination's district gathering last month, I met a former rabbi who converted to Christianity. Even though he still goes around with a skullcap on his head, and probably still eats Kosher food, I'm sure that most of his fellow Jews despise him. But he'll let his enemies rant and rave, if only they are won to Christ. What are we willing to endure so that our enemies may be won to Christ? One week ago today, a gunman opened fire in a Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville. According to the police, he was upset with this church's liberalism, which denies the divinity of Christ and openly promotes the gay agenda. His hateful actions have reinforced the stereotype that Christians are violently homophobic. Let me just read you a couple of posts from a Knoxville website:

"Most Liberals and Gays...are some of the best and brightest in society...that their equality would threaten this bigot and that he would identify them for the blame of his own failings and weaknesses---is proof how complete the twisted training of traditional Christianity and the conservative movement [is]...they teach who to hate very well...I would not count on any of these hate mongers to take responsibility for what they are spreading."

"In response to your comment about 'gays will not inherit the kingdom...', I find this totally offensive in the context of this story. This is a tragedy based on hate. Two innocent people were killed. You are reckless with your comment...perhaps you need to read a few more chapters in your bible...and remember that not everyone on this earth is a Christian who subscribes to your self-centered beliefs."

"The Bible was written by man – the New Testament was written many, many years after the lifetime of Jesus and that portion[s] in [it] have been rewritten repeatedly to accommodate the needs of whatever group was in power. Most rational people do not think it is the literal word of God."

When we hear insulting comments like these we want to respond in the same way, but we must not because if we crush our enemies, we lose them. We need to remember that the same freedom of speech that allows people to attack Christians also allows Christians to speak the truth in love. You can't be arrested for talking about Jesus,. It's still legal to carry a Bible to work or to school. I haven't had to submit any of my sermons to government censors. No matter what nonsense people say about Christ, Paul says that he will be praised forever in heaven. That's because Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." He let his enemies triumph over him for the moment so that we could triumph forever in heaven. And so when our enemies attack us, it's OK to let them win for the moment. If they are won to Christ, we'll win too. AMEN.