

# Vital relationships: Dealing with difficult people

Sermon for Sunday, March 25, 2007  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:43-44; Luke 6:27-28

When I was here two weeks ago, talking about vital relationships in the church, the family of God, I made mention of people who are hard to get along with. Using Paul in the Bible as an example of that, I said that we welcome and love everyone in the church, even people who are difficult.

Today, as I conclude this sermon series on vital relationships, I want to focus on how we deal with difficult people.

## 1) Fighting back doesn't work

Let's say the person you have trouble with is a real jerk. (Never mind the fact that s/he thinks the same thing about you—we all know we're perfect, and the problem is always with the other person.) This person does things to you just to be mean and spiteful. Oh, wouldn't it feel good to get even! That's human nature to be like. People were like that back in Jesus' time.

**Matthew 5:43, New International Version:**

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' "

But taking vengeance doesn't work. Two wrongs don't make a right. Adding evil to evil doesn't produce good. Paul echoed Jesus' words when he wrote his letter to the Romans:

**Romans 12:14-21, New International Version**

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ... Live in harmony with one another. ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. ... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

In a hockey game, if two players start fighting, the referee doesn't come over and ask, "Now you two, who started this?" No, they both get thrown in the penalty box.

Unfair? Absolutely yes! But Jesus wasn't talking about fairness. Imagine if God treated us "fairly" for all the bad things we've ever done! No, Jesus wants us to achieve something far greater than mere fairness.

Let's go back to that passage I quoted earlier, about what Jesus says. In the next sentence, he adds three amazing words.

**Matthew 5:43-44, New International Version:**

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies."

Love can mean many things. It can be a warm feeling: "I think I'm in love." That's nice, but it's not enough when you're dealing with a fire breathing dragon.

"Love" is a verb. It means action. Not just nice thoughts. It means becoming involved.

Jesus goes on to give us several specific ways we live love for our dragons.

## 2) How to love your enemies

### a) Pray for them

The final part of that passage we've been looking at says this:

**Matthew 5:43-44 (NIV)**

"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."

Luke's gospel has a slightly different version of how Jesus said this.

**Luke 6:27-28, New International Version:**

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

How do you pray for enemies? You bless them. Pray for good things to happen in their lives.

Now, our automatic reaction is to say, "I can't pray for someone I don't like." That's not true. In fact, it is the very opposite that is true: You can't dislike someone you pray for. When we start praying for our dragons, we find that the loathing, the fear, even the hate is replaced by something else: love.

**b) Forgive them**

Mark 11:25, New Living Translation:

“When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.”

Again, our automatic reaction is to say, “Well that’s very nice, Jesus. But you surely don’t mean that so-and-so who did such-and-such to me!” I believe Jesus would reply to us, “That is precisely what I mean. In fact, the more that you hate someone, the more you need to forgive them. That hatred is destroying you from the inside, far more than your enemy on the outside.”

In August 1983, Russell Stendal was taken hostage in the jungle of Colombia, South America, by a band of guerrilla soldiers. For nearly 5 months he learned what it really means to love one’s enemies. He wrote a letter home, saying, “I am in danger only of losing my life; they are in danger in losing their souls.” Russell was kind to his guards at every opportunity, and they became like friends. One day the commander told him, “We can’t kill you face to face; we like you. So we will have to kill you in your sleep.” Russell forgave them for what was about to happen. For the next 10 days and nights a machine gun was repeatedly thrust in his face under his mosquito net, but the guards couldn’t bring themselves to pull the trigger. On January 3, 1984, Russell was released. When he said goodbye, many of the guerrillas were openly weeping.

**c) Do good to those who hate you**

Let’s look again at that passage as Luke’s gospel records it.

Luke 6:27-28, New International Version:

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

Danny Moe, a pastor in British Columbia, relates this story just as it was told to him:

When I was in the army, there was one fellow who got religion. I and all the other fellows would give him a hard time, but it never bothered him. Every night, right there in front of all the rest of us, he would kneel by his bunk and pray.

One rainy, cold night he came in off guard duty. He was cold and wet, but he still got down on his knees. I was just getting into bed, and as I took off my army boots, I let one of them fly, hitting him right on the head, sending him reeling

across the floor. I laughed and rolled over in bed.

The next morning I went looking for my boots. I found them sitting neatly at the foot of my bed, beautifully polished. When I saw that polish gleaming, that was when I asked Christ to come into my life.

**3) Remember why we do this**

Some of these stories I’ve told end with the fire-breathing dragons having a change of heart. Sometimes it happens; most of the time it won’t. But let us remember: our motive for loving enemies is *not* to make them change. If that is what you live for, to make people like you, then you will only be sick and miserable. The reason is simple: that is a selfish attitude. It is all about ME.

Loving our enemies requires an entirely different attitude. It is all about THEM. It is all about JESUS. And that makes all the difference.