

# OSJ



Office of Social Justice



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## CARING FOR OUR NEIGHBOR: LOVE YOUR ENEMIES JOHN HUYSER

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*(with focus on the Syrian Refugee Crisis-2015)*

**Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 10:25-37**

Throughout his earthly life, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ had enemies—real enemies. Isaiah the prophet predicted it long before his birth: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hid their faces, he was despised.”

Soon after his birth, this child was on the “most wanted” list. An angel warned Joseph in a dream that King Herod wanted Jesus dead, and as refugees Joseph, and Mary, and Jesus sought the safety of Egypt until it was safe for them to go home.

And then when Jesus began his ministry, the very ones who should have welcomed him (the so-called experts—every ruling group with influence—the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Herodians, the chief priests, the elders of the people, and the teachers of the law) rejected him. And then even one from his own small circle, Judas, turned on Jesus and betrayed him. Jesus had enemies all around him who would ultimately succeed in crucifying him even if it was in accordance with God’s will.

And of all things, what was Jesus doing on the cross? There Jesus actually prayed for his enemies, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

This is just the opposite of what we would normally expect. The natural inclination is to hate your enemies, to get them before they get you, and if not, to at least get revenge and make them pay. Repeated again and again on the big screen, that’s the basic plot line for many of Hollywood’s movies—the kind that honestly make us want to cheer inside as the underdog victim overcomes and the offenders get theirs. And even according to Revelation and other Bible texts, ultimately Jesus’ enemies will be defeated and Satan, Jesus’ greatest adversary, will fall.

Yet again, the opposite of what we would expect, Jesus directs us in our text, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Now pause for just a moment. Can you feel some tension rumbling inside of you right now between what we would like to do versus what Jesus tells us to do?

For long before our births, Jesus prophesied that we too would have enemies.

John 15:18-19-- “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.”

John 17:13-14-- As Jesus is praying to his Heavenly Father, he acknowledges, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world." And then later on in the New Testament, Jesus' own words are echoed by Paul and the Apostle John: "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted and do not be surprised if the world hates you. . . ." (2 Tim. 3:12)

And even though John says not to be surprised, I have to confess that at times I am! After all, what Jesus is saying took place such a long time ago. Why DO we have enemies today? Weren't we always taught Christianity was to be admired? Wasn't it reinforced from stories of our grandparents and parents that our good and honest work ethic that would help us find success would be sought after by employers? Weren't Christians the wise and honest ones, the ones to go seek advice from and the ones to imitate?

But far from being admired, Christianity is perceived as a growing threat. Sometimes we are oblivious to that negative perception. Look at it from the outsider's point of view.

With our Scriptural absolutes, we are a threat to those who want to believe and do as they want. Absolutes on the origins of the world and why we are here somehow are perceived as a threat to scientific freedoms. Absolutes on the source of life and when life begins are perceived as a threat to women's reproductive rights. Absolutes on the definition of marriage between one man and one woman are perceived as discriminatory, a threat to personal freedoms. And our firm, no budging absolute about the one way to salvation in Jesus Christ is a threat to all other religions as well to agnostics and atheists. And the list goes on.

But then consider too that in many cases we have rightfully deserved some criticism as a body of believers, reinforcing the idea that Christians are hypocrites who don't really practice what we preach in the first place:

- High-profile ministers and believers, with their spectacular public falls from grace, show that our leaders just can't be trusted.
- Church scandals and real incidences of avoiding accountability covering up physical abuses have further eroded public trust in the church.

Now on a universal scale, the church family will always have her enemies because we ARE people of the Book—followers of God's Word. And so being well aware of current events today, we could add to our enemies list those who wish to exterminate Christianity nation by nation, like militant Muslim extremists and ISIS, government-persecution in China and North Korea, militant groups in Africa like Boko Haram, so-called politically correct people in our own country.

What's clear is this: Christians must expect to face many enemies on account of their faith. Such opposition is the inevitable result of our faith commitment to Jesus Christ.

The great challenge to us, though, is that this all seems so far removed from us away in rural Jarvis—a world away in fact—something we watch on a news story that is too shocking to our ears to be true, almost as if it were mere fiction.

One story that's a world away is the refugee crisis in Hungary as tens of thousands of Syrian refugees, the majority of them Sunni Muslims, are fleeing the violence in their homeland and working their way into Europe for the hope of a new life. (Some of them are Christians, but large numbers fled this area long ago, though few in the media took notice at the time.) And as Muslims, even though peaceful compared to the militant extremists, many of us form this picture in our heads that they are enemies because they are non-Christians. What are we to do? In the long-term picture of things, will helping them do more harm than good?

But then, seeing the pictures over these past few weeks, Ryan Duncan, editor of CrossWalk.com, a Christian blog, wrote:

"There are simply no words I can give to convey the shock and despair one experiences witnessing the scenes of a dead child lying face down on a beach in Greece. The recent photos of young Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian refugee, who drowned alongside his mother and 5-year-old brother while attempting to flee the Syrian civil war, have shaken the Western world awake. What should we say? What can we say? It's tempting for us to remain insulated from the crisis, free to worry about trivial things . . . but this is the hour in which the Church cannot remain silent."

So what is delaying action? Besides the overwhelming numbers waiting for help, there is FEAR. Fear because they are potential enemies—MUSLIM. Most of the minority Christians had already left Syria prior to this mass refugee crisis. Many of them went ignored by the nations of the world. The majority of those you see on the news headlines right now are Muslim. Similar to those who self-identify themselves as Christians, some are nominal believers while others are strict adherents. But this we do know: they do not acknowledge Christ as Lord and Savior. Add to that the stereotyping, much of it false, that all Muslims are potential terrorists, and quickly they are ENEMIES. Other nations are afraid:

- The New York Times reports Israel has refused assistance. Allowing any of these refugees in would cause a Muslim imbalance in the country.
- The International Business Times reports that France is turning down any refugees regardless of age who practice Islam for fear of repeats of terrorism that took place on their soil.
- Members on the floor of the Dutch Parliament are calling this a potential underhanded Islamic invasion that must be prevented.

So what is happening here?

As a first step here, Canada will be multiplying donations 2:1, establishing some sort of screening process to admit a limited number of families will soon follow. In the U.S. the CRC through Bethany Christian Services has already admitted some families. Next month someone from the CRC office will be inviting churches to respond at our classis meeting.

Now think back over the history of this church. Our church has a history of sponsorship—coming around refugee families and saving lives. There was no precondition that they must be Christian to help them; the fact that they were image-bearers was more than enough. And once again before us is a concrete way to put Jesus' words into practice. This is no longer a world away from us. The opportunity is here now to assist financially, and in a matter of a few months we could be helping with sponsorship if we get behind this as a community.

Yes, Jesus cautioned us in last week's passage to be wise and discerning when it came to helping unbelievers, but the Parable of the Good Samaritan also emphasizes that we can't shrug our shoulders and do nothing. This morning I was touched deeply by a news report echoing that very same parable. In the news was a survivor of another refugee boat that sank this week. In broken English he described both his terror and how he no longer even felt human; he felt more animal than man. As their boat was going under, first a Turkish Navy boat came by for a look but did nothing. Then a Greek Coast Guard cutter came by and still nothing. Their Good Samaritan was a television news crew who offered the survivors food and journeyed with them on foot to the Austrian border where doctors and Red Cross officials were at the ready. We are called to be that Good Samaritan.

And if you still find yourselves concerned for fears of safety, like some have for good reason, knowing first-hand as American citizens what our family works through to get a two-year immigration renewal here, I have no doubt whatsoever that Canada will have an intensive screening and follow-up process in place to minimize any potential for threat.

But now in light of this passage, whether you consider these refugees to be an enemy or a neighbor or somewhere in between, what will our response be?

Our example is Jesus Christ, and Jesus set the bar high as to what it means to show love to our neighbors and our enemies.

(1) Jesus demonstrated and lived out a generous grace by offering healing and life-giving truths to the Centurion's daughter, the arresting soldier Peter attacked, and the Samaritan woman at the well, and by offering merciful healing to those on the outside.

(2) Jesus prayed for his enemies and even asked God to forgive those who were crucifying him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

(3) And Paul goes on in Romans 12 to cite a passage from Proverbs encouraging Christians to win people with kindness, knowing that it is ultimately up to God within the realm of heavenly justice to punish his enemies.

But in the meantime, Paul writes, "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" (Romans 12:20-21).

Like many of Jesus' sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, this passage encouraging us to love our enemies flies in the face of common wisdom of the day. Let's admit it: following Jesus' example goes against what would be most popular to do today, to go on about our lives. The easy way out is to turn off the channel and look the other way.

That is, until we consider that we were all once enemies of God in our sin, according to Colossians 1:21. By giving himself completely for you at the Cross, and actually dying for you, Christ brought you back to God's side—no longer an enemy, but his adopted child. Shouldn't we offer no less to our neighbors or our enemies? AMEN.