

"Love Your Enemies" Isn't About Your Feelings

Overview

Luke 14:26, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple."

Love your enemies in Matthew 5 is the Sermon on the Mount command that everyone reads as a feeling. The Greek word *agapē* separates will from warmth, and the Gospel of Matthew preserves that distinction. Greek had four distinct words for what English collapsed into one. *Στοργή* (*Storge*) for parent and child. *Ερως* (*Eros*) for desire. *Φιλέω* (*Phileō*) for the warmth between friends. And *ἀγαπή* (*agapē*) for the willed orientation toward another's good. The collapse happened at the English step. Wycliffe translated from the Latin in 1382 with one word. Tyndale saw four Greek words and kept the single English word because the language had only one. The King James translators inherited the choice. This study walks through the *agapē* command against the *phileō* verse Matthew used five chapters earlier for family love in Matthew 10:37. Jesus had the warm word in his vocabulary. He chose not to use it toward the enemy. Five imperatives unpack the command: pray, bless, do good, lend, and greet. All are behaviors. Not one is a feeling. After this, the verse stops accusing you and starts naming what you have already been doing for years.

Summary

The Greek verb *agapā* conveys a willed orientation toward another's good. Strong's lexicon defines it as judgment, deliberate assent of the will, a matter of principle, duty, and propriety, and notes it is of the head. *Phileō* gets a separate entry: personal attachment, a matter of sentiment or feeling, of the heart. Thayer's lexicon draws the same line. Matthew preserves the distinction within his own gospel. Matthew 10:37 uses *phileō* to describe the love between parent and child. Matthew 5:44 uses *agapā* when Jesus speaks of the enemy. The word *echthros*, translated as enemy, names a person bent on inflicting harm, traced to a root meaning hatred. The oral rule Jesus corrects in Matthew 5:43—"love your neighbor and hate your enemy"—is not from the Hebrew Bible. The second half traces back to the Community Rule found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, a sectarian teaching that the sons of light should love one another and hate the sons of darkness. Jesus corrects the sect, not Torah. In Matthew 5:45, the Father's model grounds the command in provision: sun on the evil and rain on the unjust. The model is weather, not sentiment. Light extended without partiality. Water sent without warmth required. Every imperative in the passage, pray, bless, do good, lend, greet, is something the will can

perform without the feeling agreeing. Matthew 5:48 closes the passage with τέλειος (teleios), rendered perfect in English but defined in the lexicons as mature, brought to completion, developed through the necessary stages. The standard is developmental, not absolute. Every prayer offered through gritted teeth for the person who wounded you has been agapā. Every refusal to retaliate has been agapā. The will carrying out what the feeling cannot is the Father's own pattern working through you.

An Examination of the Text

“Love your enemies.” You have heard those words since you could hear. You have prayed for someone who hurt you. The warmth did not rise, and you said the prayer anyway. You waited for the feeling, but it never came. That waiting was not failure. The command was already at work. Your Bible says love. The underlying Greek word is agapā, the verb of the will, not the heart. There is another Greek word for a warm feeling. It is phileō. Jesus did not choose it. We will walk both words. The Father's own model. So why did the church teach the feeling version when the Greek separates the two? And how did one English word swallow four Greek words for love? And what have you been doing every time you prayed through the pain?

There is a single English word that hangs over your kitchen, your wedding album, and your child's bedroom door. That word is love. However, Greek has four words for what English expresses with just one. Storge is the bond of a parent toward a child. Eros is the pull of desire. Phileō is the warmth between friends. And agapā is the willed orientation toward another's good. The Greek separated them—the English collapsed them. When your Bible says love your enemies, every reader brings their own English version of the word to the verse. None of those is what Jesus said.

What he said begins with a word for the enemy, the Greek word is ἐχθρός (echthros). Echthros does not mean a coworker you avoid or someone you find difficult. It translates to "enemy," "foe," or "adversary." In ancient Greek, it is an adjective derived from *echtho* (to hate) and generally describes someone or something that is hateful, odious, or actively hostile. Echthros names a person bent on inflicting harm. This is not a softened command. The person in the verse actually wounded you. Now look at what Jesus says before the command. He cites a saying his audience already knew: Love your neighbor; hate your enemy. The first half is Leviticus chapter 19:18, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (KJV). However, the second half is not in the Hebrew Bible. It is not anywhere in the Old Testament. It traces to a sectarian writing called the Community Rule. The community at Qumran lived about 100 years before Jesus, and they taught that the sons of light should love one another and *hate the sons of darkness*. The teaching circulated as an oral tradition by Jesus's day. Therefore, Jesus corrects an oral rule. He does not correct the Torah.

So how did the English collapse four Greek words for love into just one? The first complete English Bible was finished in 1382 AD by John Wycliffe. It is important to recognize that he translated from the Latin Vulgate, not the Greek. The Latin still distinguished the two faculties.

But Wycliffe translated into Middle English, which had only one primary word for love. The collapse happened at the English step. A century and a half later, William Tyndale translated from the Greek. He saw the four words; unfortunately, he kept the single English word because the language he was translating into had only one. The King James translators in 1611 AD inherited that choice. When the revivalist tradition arrived in the nineteenth century, it elevated felt experience as the test of real faith. If your conversion was real, you felt it. If your obedience was real, you felt it. The single English word for love met this test, so the two became one teaching. By the time the verse reached you, the conflation was complete. This conflation lives in the language and the pulpit. It **does not** live in the command.

Where do the lexicons themselves place the word? Open Strong's lexicon to the words *agapā* and *phileō*. Notice what the lexicon itself says about where each word lives. Strong's defines *agapā* as judgment, deliberate assent of the will, a matter of principle, duty, and propriety. The lexicon then says, in its own words, that *agapā* is of the head. *Phileō* gets a different entry. *Phileō* denotes personal attachment, a matter of sentiment or feeling. The lexicon then says, in its own words, that *phileō* is of the heart. The lexicons draw the line for you. The will is one faculty, while feeling is another. And Thayer's lexicon agrees. The major reference works distinguish the two. When Jesus chose the word for the enemy command, he chose the word for the will.

Now read the verse again with the inventory in front of you. Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (NASB). Love is a behavior; pray is a behavior; do good is a behavior. In the parallel passage in Luke 6:35, Jesus adds another: "lend, expecting nothing in return." Another behavior. Back in Matthew 5:47, Jesus names one more: "If you greet only your brothers *and sisters*, what more are you doing *than others*?" Greet everyone you meet: another behavior. Five imperatives unpack the command. Five concrete actions of the will. Not one of them is a feeling.

- A person can pray for someone they dread. The mouth opens. The words form. The prayer is offered. The dread is still there. The prayer is still real.
- A person can speak well of someone they cannot stand. The lips move. The blessing is spoken. The standing is still hard. The blessing is still real.
- A person can do good for someone who wronged them. The hand opens. The bread is given. The wrong is still remembered. The good is still done.

Every imperative in the passage is something the will can perform without the feeling of agreement. If the lexicon and the inventory agree, the case for the command should be closed. But the New Testament has more than one author. Did anyone else preserve the distinction? Or did Matthew reach for any word for love when Jesus spoke of enemies?

Open the same Bible you have always used, and turn back five chapters to Matthew 10:37, "The one who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me." [See the previous section (24) for a detailed explanation.] Read that again. The same gospel, by the same author, and the same teacher. Jesus is speaking about family love. The Greek word in this verse is not *ἀγαπή* (*agapā*) but *φιλέω* (*phileō*). When Matthew records Jesus speaking about the warmth between parent and child, he uses *phileō*, the word for felt affection. Five chapters later, when

Matthew records Jesus speaking about the enemy, he uses *agapā*, the word for unconditional love. Matthew knew the difference between the two words. He preserved it. He used *phileō* when Jesus meant family warmth. He used *agapā* when Jesus meant the will toward an enemy's good. The choice was forensic. If Jesus had wanted to command a warm feeling toward the enemy, the word for it was already in his vocabulary. He had used it for the family. He chose not to use it toward the enemy.

Stay in Matthew, but look at the next verse (5:45), “so that you may prove yourselves to be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous.” Read that slowly. Jesus grounds the command in the Father's own pattern. He does not say, follow the Father's example by feeling tenderness toward sinners. He says the Father makes the sun rise on the evil and sends rain on the unjust. The Father's love in this passage is not sentiment. It is weather and provision. Love extended without partiality. Water sent without partiality. The ground does not have to deserve the rain, nor do the crops have to be grateful. The Father gives anyway. That is the model.

The *agapā* Jesus commands is the same kind of provision. Light, water, and sustenance are extended without the giver's warmth toward the receiver. The command is not to summon a feeling you do not have for the person who hurt you. The command is, "Send the rain. Pray for them. Bless them. Do good to them. Refuse to retaliate." You can send rain on a field you have no warmth for. The Father has been doing it as long as there has been rain. So, what does the passage actually ask of you? And what have you been doing without knowing it? Read the verse one more time. But this time, every command is something you can do without feeling anything. Love your enemies. Will their good. The will is yours to use. The will operates whether warmth comes or not. Bless those who curse you. Speak well of them when their name comes up. The mouth obeys before the heart agrees. Do good to those who hate you. Open the hand. Give what is needed. The hand obeys before the heart agrees. Pray for those who persecute you. Bring their name before the Father. The Father hears prayer offered through gritted teeth as clearly as prayer offered with warmth.

Now look at the last verse of the passage. Verse 48: “Therefore you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The English word ‘perfect’ carries the heaviest burden in this verse for the modern reader. Perfect sounds like being sinless and emotionally pure. The verse seems to demand a state you have never reached and cannot reach. The Greek word is *τέλειος* (*teleios*). *Teleios* does not mean sinless. Lexicons define *teleios* as “mature, brought to completion, and developed through the necessary stages to reach the end goal.” The standard is a process, not a state of inner perfection. The Father's standard is developmental. Take the next step. Send the next rain. Pray the next prayer. Refuse the next retaliation. **Apply this to your own life.**

Every prayer you have offered for the person who wounded you, even if it was through gritted teeth, has been *agapā*. Every refusal to retaliate when you had reason to has been *agapā*. Every wish for that person's good, no matter how reluctant or how cold, has been *agapā*. Every choice not to repay evil with evil has been *agapā*. You have already been obeying. You just did not know it. The capacity to send rain on a field you have no warmth for is the Father's own

pattern working through you. The will above the reaction. The faculty of choice carries out what the faculty of feeling cannot. This teaching is for those who read scripture this way. What does this mean the next time the wonder's name surfaces in your mind? And where does the capacity to do this even come from?

Stand outside in the rain for one minute. Notice that the rain does not ask whether the ground deserves it. The capacity within you to pray for someone you have no warmth for is not your own strength. It is the Father's pattern operating through you. The same Father who sends rain on the unjust sends prayer through your unwilling lips. The same Father who makes the sun rise on the evil makes your refusal to retaliate possible. You did not generate this capacity. You inherited it. The Father is the source, and you are the heir. The text grants what the English softened. The fish lives because of the water. Matthew 5:45 names the pattern: "He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous." The Father's hand is not closed, and neither is yours. Two faculties live in you. The faculty of feeling reacts to the wound. The faculty of choice extends the rain anyway. The second faculty is the inheritance. If this is how you read scripture, you belong with the people who do.