

BONUS LESSON

ENEMIES

Those who live in the kingdom of God
are called to love their enemies.

THE WORD

Psalm 35:1-28; Matthew 5:43-48

ENGAGE THE WORD

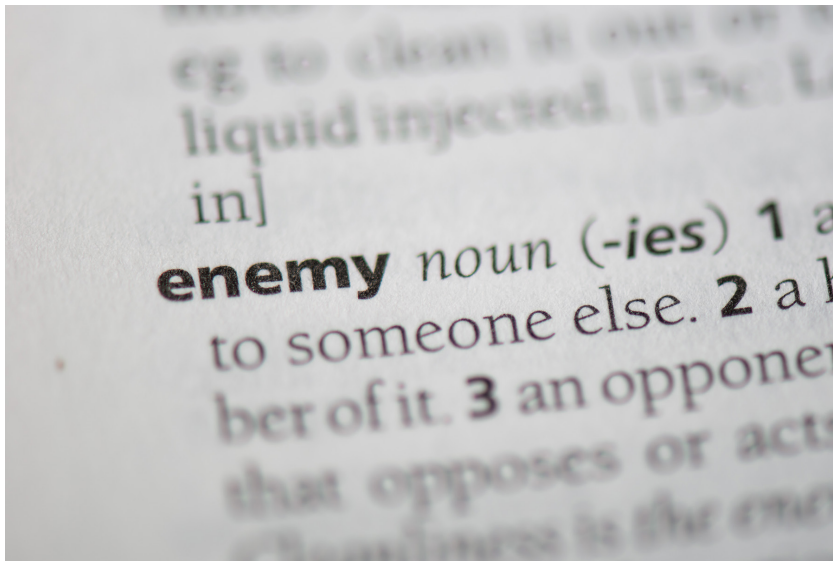
A Provocative World

We live in a provocative world. When people do not get what they want, they provoke others to either tend to their demands or fear the repercussions.

This is not new to me because I am old enough to remember the Civil Rights marches of my youth. Growing up in Mississippi, I saw plenty. My hometown was once labeled “the bombing capitol of the south.” The KKK was active. They burned a cross on the front lawn of the East McComb Baptist Church just up the street from my home. I rode my bike to see the charred timber on the lawn of the gathering place of God’s people. This church had integrated.

I also remember the Vietnam War. I was in college by then and the draft was snatching up my friends. My roommate was the first birthday drawn in the draft lottery. College students did not like this war and were cutting their young teeth on protests.

It seems that we are there again—a provocative world filled with people who view one another as enemies to be opposed and defeated. In the recent past we have seen Occupy Wall Street, response to the killing of black youth in St. Louis and Chicago, the Black Lives Matter movement, marches in support of DACA students in Nashville, political rancor around the most recent presidential election, college campuses in Maryland and Missouri ousting an unpopular president, and Charlottesville where the removal of a Confederate statue seems to be the boiling point for White Supremacy and Nazi groups. Add to this the more global recognition of terrorism with militant religious fundamentalists believing they are obeying their god by killing the infidels who do not see the world as they do. Mass murder, bombs, vehicular homicide, and fear are the weapons of these persons.



Like it or not, we live in a world of named enemies. They come in different shapes and sizes. Some are more violent than others. Destruction is their goal. Others are not seeking harm, but rather bringing attention to issues that are important to them. They are provoking people in authority to pay attention to things being swept under the rug. Religion and race seem to be the touch-points of the anger that is rising. And the church is being placed in the crosshairs of the battle field. In some cases, we are the declared enemy because of our silence, our understanding of marriage, our nationalism, our

segregation, or our Lord. Some of the criticism is justified, some isn't. So how do we respond when we are declared to be the enemy?

Dealing with Enemies

Thankfully, we have friends, very old friends, in the Psalms of Lament. In Psalm 35, an enemy has struck. This psalmist opens his heart wide enough to give us a freeze frame of his pain.

*Harass these hecklers, God, punch these bullies in the nose.
Grab a weapon, anything at hand; stand up for me!
Get ready to throw the spear, aim the javelin, at the people who are out to get me.
Reassure me; let me hear you say, "I'll save you."
When those thugs try to knife me in the back, make them look foolish.
Frustrate all those who are plotting my downfall.
Make them like cinders in a high wind, with God's angel working the bellows.
Make their road lightless and mud-slick, with God's angel on their tails.
Out of sheer cussedness they set a trap to catch me; for no good reason they dug a ditch to stop me.
Surprise them with your ambush—catch them in the very trap they set, the disaster they planned for me.
But let me run loose and free, celebrating God's great work,
Every bone in my body laughing, singing, "God, there's no one like you.
You put the down-and-out on their feet and protect the unprotected from bullies!"*
(Psalm 35:1-10, The Message)

Our friend is following standard operating procedure for dealing with enemies. It is the pattern of lament used in psalms of trouble. The A-B-C structure is,

Address God and call on God to notice what is happening to you.

Bring your complaint before God. In this case, tell God what your enemy is doing to you.

Call on God to save you from the intended outcome and promise that when God does, you will praise God to the high heavens among the gathered people.

This is Enemy 101, by the book. And I get why this is necessary. When something horrible happens, it is better to have a practiced ritual response that requires little thought than to fly off the handle, combust, overreact, and strike back. We're not very good at handling explosive material, so we stick to the plan—ABC (Enemy 101). Our friend in Psalm 35 is playing it by the book. These first 10 verses are one of the most precise expressions of the pattern of lament that can be found in the psalms. But apparently, he can't leave it there. Something is still stuck in his craw and he has more to say.

*Hostile accusers appear out of nowhere, they stand up and badger me.
They pay me back misery for mercy, leaving my soul empty.
When they were sick, I dressed in black; instead of eating, I prayed.
My prayers were like lead in my gut, like I'd lost my best friend, my brother.
I paced, distraught as a motherless child, hunched and heavyhearted.
But when I was down they threw a party!
All the nameless riffraff of the town came chanting insults about me.
Like barbarians desecrating a shrine, they destroyed my reputation.
God, how long are you going to stand there doing nothing?
Save me from their brutalities; everything I've got is being thrown to the lions.
I will give you full credit when everyone gathers for worship;
When the people turn out in force I will say my Hallelujahs.*
(Psalm 35:11-18, The Message)

I suppose we humans need to over-explain what our enemy is doing to us. Once is not enough. Or maybe everyone has not quite heard how innocent we are and how guilty they are. We were so good to them when they were sick and needy. We were saintly, they were sinister. Our motives were pure, theirs poison. So our friend returns to the lament pattern and adds more to the B section (ratting on the enemy) and closes with another flowery C ("when you finally act in my favor God, I'll give you full credit").

I love the fact that these prayers made the cut. We don't use them very often in our worship. As followers of a crucified Lord who had real enemies, we need to know what to do with our enemies. I'm still waiting for some brave soul to stand up during the morning service and declare,

Pastor, I have something I need to share with the church today.
Someone lied about me this week.
I went to this person and tried to make it right and this person spit in my face.
Now they're setting traps for me and spreading more lies. I've had it with this guy.
This is the last straw. I am sick and tired of being assaulted by his mouth.
I hope he loses his job, gets hauled into court, sued into bankruptcy, and sentenced to do hard time.
I hope the bank forecloses on his mortgage, seizes his assets, and runs a front page headline telling the whole town what a jerk he is.
I hope every evil deed he has done comes back to haunt him until the day he dies and then I hope people line up to spit on his grave.
And I love the Lord with all my heart and long to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
Amen.

That would be a service to remember. There is octane in this prayer, the kind that we find in Psalm 35. And believe it or not, our psalm friend still isn't done.

*Don't let these liars, my enemies, have a party at my expense,
Those who hate me for no reason, winking and rolling their eyes.
No good is going to come from that crowd;
They spend all their time cooking up gossip against those who mind
their own business.
They open their mouths in ugly grins,
Mocking, "Ha-ha, ha-ha, thought you'd get away with it?
We've caught you hands down!"*

*Don't you see what they're doing, God?
You're not going to let them get by with it, are you?
Not going to walk off without doing something, are you?*

*Please get up—wake up! Tend to my case.
My God, my Lord—my life is on the line.
Do what you think is right, God, my God,
but don't make me pay for their good time.
Don't let them say to themselves,
"Ha-ha, we got what we wanted."
Don't let them say,
"We've chewed him up and spit him out."
Let those who are being hilarious at my expense
Be made to look ridiculous.
Make them wear donkey's ears;
Pin them with the donkey's tail,
who made themselves so high and mighty!*

*But those who want the best for me,
Let them have the last word—a glad shout!—
and say, over and over and over,
"God is great—everything works together for good for his servant."
I'll tell the world how great and good you are,
I'll shout Hallelujah all day, every day.
(Psalm 35:19-28, The Message)*

Alright, now he's done. I can hear the liturgical response among the people of God at the close of this reading: "This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God." Really? What is this doing in the Bible? Simple. It is how we feel when we are being done wrong, when things are being said about us that aren't true, when peace is being smashed by protest, when truth is being rewritten, when accusation is being launched, when anger and violence become the mode of protest. For some reason, we believe these things matter to God. So we,

Address God and call on God to notice what is happening to us.

Bring our complaint before God and tell God what our enemy is doing to us.

Call on God to save us from the intended outcome of our enemy and promise that when God does, we will praise God to the high heavens in the gathered congregation.

Is it wrong to want vengeance? God announces several times, “Vengeance is mine. I will repay.” Ours is a God who loves justice, destroys evil, and leverages consequences. God doesn’t sweep evil under a cosmic rug, wink at it, or look the other way pretending not to notice. Revenge and vengeance are God’s stated prerogative. And we, the followers of this God, have been formed to believe that this stuff matters enough in the presence of God to bring our ABC petition to the throne. But like our friend in Psalm 35, we sometimes think we need to help God out a bit, explain it a little better, or suggest the appropriate divine response. God appears to be slow and clumsy at following our prayerful instructions. Especially when there is no justice in sight, and criminals walk, and cheaters win, and abusers go free, and liars are believed. So we help God out. And we feel justified in doing so because we are certain that He is on our side. We even have a name for our assistance—righteous anger. And maybe it is righteous anger. But I suspect it is a little more self-righteous than righteous.

As I observe humans, we tend to go in one of two directions when dealing with our enemies.

1. *Outward*. This one looks like road rage, a fist through a wall, a raised voice, a quick email retort, blunt words, demeaning comments, or hand signals. We, like our gushing Psalm 35 friend, need to put it out on the table so everyone can understand what our enemy is doing.
2. *Inward*. Many Christians are too nice to do any of the outward stuff so we swallow it down into the pit of our being and hope it gets dealt with there. We process enemies inwardly. And this eventually looks like obsessive worrying, biting fingernails to the quick, overeating, cutting, overmedicating, depression, passive-aggressive behavior, low self-esteem, workaholicism, and even suicide.

In my speaking on this issue, the survey shows that about a third of church-goers deal with enemy anger outwardly and a majority two-thirds swallow it inwardly. Which are you?

In the movie *Dead Poet’s Society*, a young man named Neil attends a boarding school and discovers his love for the arts. He tries out for and gets the lead role in the upcoming campus drama, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” His father, a brash military type, finds out about the drama, makes his way to the school, and gives Neil a severe tongue-lashing. He explains in no uncertain terms that Neil is to prepare for a business career so that he can run the family business. He feels this drama nonsense must cease immediately. Neil wrestles with the war between his own desires and those of his father. He goes through with the dramatic production, believing that if his father can see him act, he will change his mind. Neil brings the house down in applause every night of the performance. His father attends the final show, leaning against the back wall with arms folded and a scowl of disdain on his face. Following the curtain call and the thunderous affirmation of Neil by the audience, the cast retreats backstage to the cast party. Neil’s father interrupts the party, drags Neil by the arm to the car, shoves him in the front seat, and tells him this is the end of his dramatic interest. They go home. Neil goes upstairs with the denunciation ringing in his ears. The father goes to sleep. In the middle of the night Neil goes into his father’s office, finds his father’s handgun, and takes his life. We see two kinds of anger in this movie—the outward anger of the father and the inward anger of the son. Both are deadly.

So what are we to do with our enemy anger? Thankfully, there is one more option. We can take it Godward. This is what the lament psalms are trying to do. It is what Paul

is encouraging the Ephesians (4:26) to do when he says, "Be angry. Sin not." Take all the octane, the hurt, the bitterness, the pain, and the disappointment to God. As we put words to it, the enemy comes to exist in the presence of God. And God is the only demolition expert with the capacity to turn our anger into something productive and good.

I remember having an enemy in a local church. It began with her disagreement of my understanding of the book of Revelation. She sat in the middle of her pew section and shook her head side to side the whole time I preached. It escalated from there as she filled out the "encouragement cards" in the pew racks with Bible verses about false prophets and hypocrites and sent them to me via the offering plate. She visited sick people in the hospital and spent an hour telling them what an awful pastor I was. She never missed a chance to do me harm. One day I was complaining to a good friend about her antics and he replied, "She is your enemy, you know." "No", I replied, "she's just a misguided sister." My friend spoke truth to me when he said, "No, she is your enemy. An enemy will take every opportunity to harm you, and she does. So if you'll finally admit that she is your enemy, then you can do the Christian thing with her." "Which is?" (I already knew what was coming.) He answered, "Ask Jesus to help you love your enemy."

Jesus' Response

My friend would bring Jesus into this. I could do the ABC, swallow it down, and over-explain her to God and anyone who would listen.... but Jesus complicates this.

The Jesus who was hunted as a baby by enemy Herod.

The Jesus who was opposed by enemy Pharisees.

The Jesus who was betrayed by enemy Judas.

The Jesus who was handed over by enemy Pilate.

The Jesus who was falsely accused by enemy Sanhedrin.

The Jesus who was tortured and tormented by enemy soldiers.

The Jesus who was crucified by enemy Rome.

The Jesus who had more enemies than I will ever face.

One day He stood on a mountain and said,

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;

for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?

Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,

what more are you doing than others?

Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

(Matthew 5:43-48, NRSV)

What kind of God is this? Can He possibly be even a distant relative to the God who claims vengeance as His own domain? This God makes the sun rise on the evil and good, and sends rain for the crops of the righteous and unrighteous. I wish Jesus had consulted me before doing this. I could have helped Him out. My plan would straighten out this

crooked world fast. Just send rain on the crops of Christian farmers and let all the others wilt in the field. And give all the cancer to child molesters. And the wife-abusers get an incurable rash. And mean-spirited gossips go bald (both male and female). Swindlers get termites. And predestine all the drunk drivers to be on the same flight, piloted by a crooked politician, and crash it into a pornography film studio. Now that would straighten out this world in a hurry.

Some have suggested that God is actually like this. AIDS is God's judgment on homosexuality. 9-11 is God's signal to America that He is sick of our ways. A tsunami is God's text message to a Muslim country that He doesn't approve of their religion. But if God is like that, why stop there? Make every bad thing that happens in our world God's vengeance.

Yet, Jesus stands on a mountain and says as clearly as we are willing to hear, "Your God is not like that. Your God is different, other, holy. Your God loves you when you are His enemy. Your God is love that confounds every response you can imagine." If Jesus had just left it with that, we would just be the people who believe in a God of holy love. But He said more. "Therefore, be children of your Father in heaven and reflect His likeness by loving your enemies as the Father loves His enemies. In this regard, be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." We're toast...unless God can empower something that is humanly impossible.

The biblical doctrine of perfection, perfect love, and Christian perfection (all good Wesleyan terms), shows up at the point of loving enemies. The love of enemies is not a peripheral issue of faith to us, but goes to the heart of what we mean holiness to be. I don't think this means we are to have warm, fuzzy feelings about people who do horrible things, nor to excuse the wrong they did, nor to sweep their actions under the rug, nor to look the other way. Rather, I think it means that we take them to God (ABC), and hold them in the presence of God until we have clarity about how to love them. It means that we will actually do enough justice in the world to make some enemies. It means that we will stop overreacting with our own self-righteous response and start imagining the way God makes things right. It means that our raw octane may become the raw material of God's justice in the world. It means that our enemy might well become our neighbor. It means that we will resemble Jesus.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Read Psalm 35:1-28 and Matthew 5:43-48, then discuss the following,

1. What stood out to you as the psalm was being read? In what ways can you relate to the thoughts and feelings expressed by the writer?
2. How do people determine who is their “enemy”? In what ways are Christians in our culture assumed to be the enemy? Is there any truth in the accusations being made?
3. Share an example of outward responses to a perceived enemy you have seen or experienced. Share an example of inward responses to a perceived enemy you have seen or experienced. Given the choices of outward and inward responses to enemy anger, silently consider which one you are most prone to.
4. In what ways do the words and life of Jesus give us the example we should follow when it comes to dealing with those we consider the enemy? How is it possible to respond to our enemies in a Christlike way?
5. Can you think of examples of enemy anger taken into the presence of God and converted into the courage to act justly? (Consider William Wilberforce with the slave issue, Martin Luther King with racism, Desmond Tutu with apartheid, and Chuck Colson with the condition of American prisons.) What can we learn from their example?
6. Consider what enemy is your greatest challenge? How do you imagine Jesus loving this enemy? How do you imagine yourself loving this enemy?

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BY DAN BOONE

President of Trevecca Nazarene University, Nashville, TN and Eastern Nazarene College, Quincy, MA.
