



Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

SESSION 3

| Scripture reading: Matthew 5:43–48 and 7:1–6

On Enemies and Honesty

As we continue to explore the central role of forgiveness in renewing our life and restoring peace, we come to the universal human experience of enmity. We have seen that self-examination helps us stay grounded in the reality of our own need for God's continuing mercy and forgiveness. Only as we become aware of our inner condition can we express ourselves honestly before God. Engaging in a confessional practice like examination of conscience can surface uncomfortable feelings—shame, guilt, anger, and grief. Each of these feelings has a legitimate place in our lives and prayers. Yet because they are intense and we often do not know how to cope with them constructively, we may tend to view them as internal enemies.

Our two basic reactions to enemies are fight and flight. With external enemies, these patterns are more apparent; we are either engaged in audible, tangible combat, or we are avoiding and hiding from the foe. But with internal enemies, it can be harder to tell if we are fighting or fleeing. We are often unaware of our enmity with disquieting emotions. When inwardly fighting anger, for example, we may subconsciously decide the easiest way to banish it is to sweep it under the rug. Fighting to keep grief at bay often means trying to convince ourselves, and others, that we've gotten over it. We typically resist painful, frightening feelings by denying or suppressing them.

We can carry the same strategy into our relationship with external enemies. Since it seems vaguely unchristian to have bad feelings about anyone, some of us like to imagine that we have no enemies at all. Have you ever said, or heard another say, "I don't have a problem getting along with anyone"? Theology professor Luther



Each of us secretly harbors despised parts of our own personality, impulses and reactions we are ashamed of: jealousy, greed, rage, self-pity, the need to be right, the desire to win, the exhilaration of feeling superior.

Smith's retort to such generalizations would be, "You just don't know enough people!"

Difficulty admitting that we have enemies is expressed in the discomfort some Christians feel over portions of the Psalms, especially the "imprecatory psalms," which cry out for God's vengeance upon perceived enemies. Even doing our best to identify with the Jews in Babylonian captivity, what business do we have as Christians saying, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" (Ps. 137:9) The Psalms travel widely over the terrain of raw emotion, leaving us uneasy if not queasy. They can descend from heights of glorious praise to depths of vengeful cursing, leaving us dizzy in the wake of sudden mood swings. It's hard to see the thread of logic leading from eighteen wonder-struck verses in Psalm 139 to the exclamation, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? . . . I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies." Just what, Christians might wonder, is "perfect hatred"?

Yet the power of the Psalms lies in the permission they give us to express every conceivable human emotion. Nothing is censored in the intimacy of prayer with God. But to pray these psalms, we must first get in touch with aspects of our own experience that correspond to

the language and emotions of these prayers. One place to begin is to recognize that we do, in fact, feel enmity toward certain people. Most of us admit there are people in our lives we don't like. It is harder to acknowledge that there are people—even whole groups of them—we don't want contact with, don't want to think about, and certainly don't want to pray for. They may be people we work or worship with; figures in government, business, or industry; dictators, terrorists, or nationalists obsessed with securing power at the expense of those *they* consider enemies.

I recall during the Bosnian War that I could barely stand to think of Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic. But the events of that time helped me understand psalms I could not otherwise have imagined praying. For example, I could well imagine a raped Muslim woman praying the first six verses of Psalm 94:

Yahweh, God of revenge,
God of revenge, appear!
Rise, judge of the world,
give the proud their desserts!

Yahweh, . . .
how much longer are the wicked to triumph?
Are these evil men to remain unsilenced,
boasting and asserting themselves?
Yahweh, they crush your people,
they oppress your hereditary people,
murdering and massacring
widows, orphans and guests. (Jerusalem Bible)

With victims of random slaughter from Rwanda to Darfur, I have at times found myself praying the invective against brute force found in Psalm 69:22–28:

May their own table prove a trap for them,
and their plentiful supplies, a snare!
May their eyes grow dim, go blind,
strike their loins with chronic palsy!

Vent your fury on them,
let your burning anger overtake them;
may their camp be reduced to ruin,
and their tents left unoccupied:
.....
Charge them with crime after crime,
. . . blot them out of the book of life . . .
(Jerusalem Bible)

If I can admit that my heart fights to keep certain people outside the boundaries of my love, I can at least begin

asking God to help me stretch those boundaries. The way I typically pray for brutal autocrats or terrorists is to ask God to convert them: "Dear Lord, please confront these dreadful people with their colossal self-delusion, paranoia, and lust for power." But then I am really asking God to confirm my judgment of these people. Perhaps this is only a bit more civilized than baldly praying *against* my enemy, a tactic admirably illustrated by Texas Ranger Captain Jack Hays just before the battle of Palo Alto in the Mexican-American War:

O Lord, we are about to join battle with vastly superior numbers of the enemy, and . . . we would mightily like for you to be on our side. . . . But if you can't do it, . . . just lie low. . . , and You will see one of the dangest fights you've ever seen. Charge!¹

Jesus teaches, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). Church historian Glenn Hinson suggests that sometimes the only way to love our enemies is to pray for them. Hinson speaks from experience, having suffered persecution at the hands of ruthless fundamentalists. I have certainly found it to be true that we cannot continue to despise a person for whom we regularly and sincerely pray. Hinson confesses that he doesn't find it easy to pray for those who revile him: "imprecatory psalms have a job to do before I get to the point that I can pray *for* my enemies. I'll have to release some anger first and let God do something with it that I can't."²

When we release pain and anger to God over people who seem impossible to embrace with love, the Spirit begins a mysterious process in our hearts. God reveals to us the enemy within our own divided self—the wounded, scary aspects of ourselves we have tried so hard to ignore, the sides of us that are humiliating to admit. Each of us secretly harbors despised parts of our own personality, impulses and reactions we are ashamed of: jealousy, greed, rage, self-pity, the need to be right, the desire to win, the exhilaration of feeling superior. These aspects of our character embarrass us when they come to light. They also signal our potential for seriously injuring others as well as ourselves. Have we never rationalized a selfish motive as something good? Never twisted the truth just a little to preserve our own advantage, or to "save face"? Have we never tried to co-opt God into the service of our own favorite cause or limited ideology? How far might we go if we felt sufficiently pressured by peers, or personally threatened?



When we begin to see ourselves *standing with* those who have fallen into the seduction of sin—to see, at least, that we are more like them than we are like God—it casts a whole new light on what it means to pray for our enemies.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta was once asked why she did what she did. She replied that it was because she knew a little Hitler lived inside her. To her admirers such a response may sound like hyperbole but it is consistent with the witness of all great saints, acutely conscious of their capacity for sin. Only by God's grace do we escape falling, and only by grace can we do what is truly good.

Judgment and Ego

When we begin to see ourselves *standing with* those who have fallen into the seduction of sin—to see, at least, that we are more like them than we are like God—it casts a whole new light on what it means to pray for our enemies. We can stand under God's judgment with them, we can implore God's mercy for all of us, but we can no longer simply stand in judgment over against them. We begin to see why judgment is God's prerogative and not ours, and why we are bidden to forgive one another as God has forgiven us.

Our need to judge others is largely a function of the ego, our false and fallen self. Recall that the ego creates its own kingdom in which everything revolves around its own center. This little realm of illusions is largely unconscious, for the ego thrives best in the dark. It hides its true motives and intentions from our waking consciousness so we do not readily see its seductions and manipulations. Whenever we start to become aware of its operations, say through self-examination, the ego will feel threatened. It will devise one strategy after another to throw us off course as we search for greater self-awareness. For the ego knows when it is fully exposed to the light of day it will die, or at least lose much of its power to shape our lives.

The early desert Abbots and Ammas (spiritual fathers and mothers of the fourth through sixth centuries) understood how central human judgments were to our false self and what a struggle it was to let them go. Many

of their "sayings" address our habits of judging others. Here is one story told of Abba Moses, a great father of fourth-century Egypt:

A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you." So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, "What is this, Father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another." When they heard that they said no more to the brother but forgave him.³

Abba Moses notes that he *does not see* the sins running out behind him. He knows well how unconscious we are concerning our own faults. It is much easier to see others' faults than our own, because the ego leads us to hide and rationalize our dark side. Jesus addresses this side of human behavior in the Sermon on the Mount: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye" (Matt. 7:3)? There is humor in Jesus' hyperbole: if we would just take the log out of our own eye, we might actually be able to see clearly enough to remove the speck from our neighbor's!

We get ourselves in trouble when we begin measuring the relative "weight" of human sins. To whatever extent other people's sins seem obviously greater than ours, we may let ourselves more easily off the hook. We feel justified in regarding with shock and horror the "big sins" of others, effectively keeping eyes off our sins and allowing us to feel a certain measure of self-righteousness. The desert Christians had something to say about this tactic:

Abba Theodore also said, "If you are temperate, do not judge the fornicator, for you would then transgress the law just as much. And he who said, 'Do not commit fornication,' also said, 'Do not judge.'"⁴

In other words, the very act of judging another human being puts us at odds with Christ's command. At the moment we judge another person we become liable to God's judgment ourselves: "For with the judgment you make you will be judged" (Matt. 7:2). It does not matter how great or small a sin appears to us. We cannot know that God's view of the magnitude of a given sin will match our view of that sin, because God alone knows the particular struggles of an individual's soul. The desert Abbots and Ammas were adamant about this

point: our human task is to observe clearly, admit to, and repent of our own sins. It is folly for one sinner to judge another.

This is a very difficult perspective for us to grasp and may well be one we do not agree with. After all, the Ten Commandments seem to elevate certain sins above others, and the legal code of the Torah specifies different degrees of punishment for various infractions of the law. The institutional church has historically distinguished between “mortal sins” and “venial sins,” and our modern justice system makes distinctions between major and minor criminal offenses. The idea that judging the sins of another is as sinful as the other’s actual sins deeply challenges our notions of justice.

Then again, Jesus’ teachings often challenged and continue to challenge people to stretch beyond conventional understandings of law, justice, and custom. Jesus was constantly being accused by religious leaders of transgressing the law, especially Sabbath laws. The teachers of Judaism were both repelled and fascinated by Jesus’ relationship to the law. They tested him to see how he would respond to Jewish law about stoning adulterers caught in the act, or whether he believed Roman laws levying taxes on Jews were legitimate. Jesus had a maddening way of eluding conventional responses and categories of thinking!

Condemnation or Discernment?

As we try to sort out what we believe concerning “judgment,” let’s note that the word carries two basic meanings: condemnation and discernment. When we speak of someone exercising “good judgment” we mean it in the sense of useful discrimination or discerning perception. Discernment is the positive face of judgment. Jesus told his disciples to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). The wisdom of the serpent is a metaphor for worldly discernment, suggesting a measure of judicious craftiness. Perhaps it implies a certain practical detachment as well, such as in Jesus’ counsel to his disciples to shake the dust off their feet when leaving towns that did not respond to their message (Matt. 10:14), or his words to listeners not to “throw your

pearls before swine” (Matt. 7:6). Notice that this counsel comes immediately after Jesus’ warning against judging others! Perhaps practical discretion about where to give your energies, and to whom, expresses discerning judgment and fits the idea of being “wise as serpents.”

The judgments of condemnation are something very different. Condemnation is the negative face of judgment. Jesus has hard words about this sort of condemning attitude earlier in his Sermon on the Mount, indicating that when we are angry with a sister or brother we make ourselves liable to judgment (Matt. 5:21–22). If we insult others or call them fools, we subject ourselves to divine wrath. Jesus is explicitly telling us that angry attitudes and condemning insults are just as spiritually dangerous as murder.

The problem with judging the offenses of others is that we fall straight into our own offenses. It is one of many ways that we become like our enemies in attempting to fight them.

But there is another way—a *third way* beyond fight or flight, beyond denial of the enmity inside us or resistance to the enemy outside. It is the way the Sioux tribe took in making a new relation of one who had deprived them of a relation; it is the way Jesus took on the cross to reconcile hostile, confused human beings with God. It is the way of love. Henri Nouwen spoke of forgiveness as love’s name in a wounded world. Next week we will explore more fully the meaning of such love in our lives.

About the Writer

Marjorie Thompson is an author, teacher, pastor, and retreat leader in the ministry of spiritual formation.

Endnotes

1. Ross Phares, *Bible in Pocket, Gun in Hand* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 136.
2. E. Glenn Hinson, “On Coping with Your Anger,” *Weavings* 9, no. 2, 36–37.
3. *The Desert Christian: Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Translated and with Foreword by Benedicta Ward (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1975), 138–39.
4. *Ibid.*, 80.