

Making Peace with Our Enemies

BY GEORGE A. MASON

We wholeheartedly long for “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,” but it is not a personal privilege of the privately pious. It is thrown into doubt every time we are confronted with the choice of whether we will deal with our enemies as righteous warriors or pitiful peacemakers.

Matthew 5:43-48
Romans 12:17-21

A brief scene in *Till We Have Faces*, C. S. Lewis’s wonderful retelling of the fable of Cupid and Psyche, reveals something we never seem to repair in our natures. Redival, the king’s second daughter who’s always been a bit feather-headed, has grown wayward and reckless. When a palace maid sees Redival whispering intimately with and kissing a young officer of the guard named Tarin, the servant awakens the king to inform on the lovers. Enraged over his property being violated, the king immediately orders the young man neutered and sold as a slave to a nearby kingdom. The king hoped that would be the end of the matter. Of course, it never is, is it? Years later, Tarin’s father organizes disgruntled nobles and other malcontents in a revolt against the king. A single act of violence committed in anger against one man begets a civil war in the kingdom.¹

Isn’t this the way of the world? Violence begets violence, revenge breeds revenge, and retaliation produces retaliation ad nauseam and ad infinitum. The eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth principle, which is often mistakenly cited as the pinnacle of biblical justice, originally was given to limit vengeance and prevent violence from getting out of hand. But taking

justice into our own hands by chopping off the hand of an enemy for stealing does nothing but hand us a lifetime of animosity and worry.

Original sin, G. K. Chesterton once observed, is the only empirically proven Christian doctrine. Just look at any child born into the world and before long you see that cute innocent nature turn ugly like the rest of us sinners. Close behind original sin in the empirical proof sweepstakes, is the principle that violence begets violence. If we hate our enemy, we may be doing what comes naturally, and we may even be justified for doing it, but we only end up caught in a cycle of hatred that will always, always, always end badly for everyone, including us.

LOVING OUR ENEMIES

We wholeheartedly long for “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” that the Apostle Paul promises the Christians of Philippi “will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (4:7). The peace of God, our peace with God, is made possible by and experienced continually in Christ, the Prince of Peace. Yet it is not a personal privilege of the privately pious. It is thrown into doubt every time we are confronted with the choice of whether we will deal with our enemies as righteous warriors or pitiful peacemakers.

I mean the word *pitiful* in its noblest sense. To have pity is not to look down on someone, but rather to look up at what that person might be if it weren't for the evil that has taken hold in the soul. It is to have mercy upon another and to see, as we say, there but for the grace of God go I. We try to identify with our enemy and imagine what it might be like to live in that person's skin. Only then do we act.

This is, after all, the kind of pity God has for you and me in Christ Jesus. God puts on the uniform of flesh and shares the injustices and insults of all who make themselves our enemies. And yet Christ refuses to be his enemies' enemy. He sets himself against their hate by loving them instead.

Jesus practices what he preaches in a way few of us do. In the Sermon on the Mount, he turns the values of the world on their head and shows how our practices can be redemptive instead of retributive: “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” (Matthew 5:43-45a).

We don't know where it was ever said, “You shall hate your enemy.” Maybe it was one of those pieces of street wisdom that passed for Scripture right alongside “God helps those who help themselves.” But it does benefit our instinct for payback.

We practice vengeance at every level of human relationship. When we argue as spouses, our repeatedly unsuccessful strategy is to match one another blame for blame, as though we could make the other person's point

go away by proving our spouse has been as bad as we have been. This never works, if “works” means winning. The only thing we accomplish is their deeper unhappiness with us. Now multiply this hurtful result by a factor of the distance between strangers or enemies instead of loved ones, and you see where this leads. Think of school bullies or work colleagues locked in a struggle of estrangement. Or the strategy in the Middle East

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right now, where Israel and the Palestinians act as though the way to peace is to kill their enemies until no one is left on the other side or they get too tired of attending funerals. How does vengeance become a victory? How can it bring peace? All it will produce is deeper hatred.

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J. R. R. Tolkien’s trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, helps us to understand Jesus’ difficult teaching. “The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many” is the only line appearing in all three books and is, as Ralph Wood notes, the “moral and religious center” of Tolkien’s story.² Bilbo Baggins, you recall, is the hobbit who vouchsafed the evil Ring after saving it from the deformed and wicked Gollum. Bilbo’s nephew, Frodo, remarks to the wise wizard Gandalf, “What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature when he had a chance!” “Pity? [Gandalf replies] It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that [Bilbo] took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.” Gandalf understands that Gollum deserves death and that he will likely not be cured of his evil before he dies. Yet he says, “even the very wise cannot see all ends.”³ Likewise we must, as the Apostle Paul warns, “leave room for the wrath of the God” who alone is able to see all ends (Romans 12:19). We must not judge others ourselves.

Bilbo’s pity becomes a counter-cultural value that pervades the epic. When at last the evil wizard Saruman is captured, the hobbits clamor for his execution. Yet Frodo, having learned the power of the pity of Bilbo from Gandalf, offers pardon to Saruman. “It is useless to meet revenge with revenge,” says Frodo; “it will heal nothing.” Pity and pardon are not what Saruman wants, however. Knowing that he is doubly defeated by

Frodo, he becomes angrier. “You have grown, Halfling. Yes, you have grown very much. You are wise, and cruel. You have robbed my revenge of sweetness, and now I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy. I hate it and you!” (3:298-299).

We cannot be certain that our pity will bring about the transformation of our enemies, but we know that it brings about ours and makes possible theirs. If we do as Jesus commands, if we make peace with our enemies by loving them, we can know at least that we are children of our heavenly Father. We may not be perfect—which means to be fully mature and completely true to our created nature—but we will be more like our perfect Father (Matthew 5:45, 48).

OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD

Orelander Love had never met a Christian, at least not one whom he knew really followed Christ, until he met Ms. Jeanette D. Aldred. She was eighty-eight when they met while Orelander Love was robbing her house. He thought the house was empty, but when he found Ms. Aldred in her bed, he panicked and started hitting her over the head. “[She] did what Jesus did under the worst circumstance, under the threat of her life and limb. She said to me, ‘Jesus loves you. I forgive you. God bless you.’ She said these things even as I beat her, kicked, robbed and cursed her. She did not deserve it, but she did as Christ did.”

In days following, Mr. Love continued to rob houses, but he was haunted by the words of the woman who forgave him even as he hurt her. He was finally arrested and when the police questioned him about other burglaries, they mentioned Jeanette Aldred’s name. He began to cry. He confessed to the crime and wanted more than anything else to speak to her family. He never was able to see her again personally, but his life has not been the same since their encounter. Orelander Love has been a Christian now for six years. In a letter composed after Jeanette’s death at age 95, he wrote: “I do not now care about the years I will spend in prison or the media or the church screaming for vengeance. It was God with the rod that I feared. Ms. Aldred wanted no vengeance She wanted me saved. Well, I have been saved ... I praise God to every inmate who will hear. I thank God for Ms. Aldred.”⁴

This is what the Apostle Paul means by overcoming evil with good. It helps us understand his peculiar phrase “for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads” (Romans 12:20). In ancient times a house would be heated from a stove filled with burning coals in the center of the room. When a poor family was without adequate coal, the woman of the house might walk by her neighbors’ windows with a bowl balanced on her head. To preserve her dignity, neighbors would pluck a burning coal from their stove and drop it on her head as she passed by. Thus, to heap burning coals of fire on a person’s head was an act of kindness. But it could also

be something that leads to repentance, if it adds heat to the head of our enemy and causes her to think about what she has done.

The story is told of a Christian rice farmer in the south of China who employed a waterwheel driven by a treadmill to irrigate his crop during times of drought. On one occasion the farmer found that a neighbor, who owned two fields below his own, had breached the retaining wall between their fields in order to drain the irrigation water onto the neighbor's land. After the first time, the farmer repaired the breach and tried again. But twice more the neighbor drained away the water. At last the man consulted friends from his church, who prayed with him and agreed that something must be done that is beyond mere fairness. The farmer took it to heart, and the next day he watered the neighbor's two fields first and then watered his own. The neighbor, when he realized what had been done, was moved by the mercy of the Christian farmer. He began to inquire about the faith of this man who would return good for evil.

We may never become friends by making peace with our enemies, but we might just become neighbors. And that's a beginning. Are we making a start?

NOTES

1 C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces, A Myth Retold* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1956; reprinted San Francisco, CA: Harvest Books, 1980), 25.

2 I am indebted to Ralph C. Wood's discussion in *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 117-155.

3 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, revised edition (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, 1967), volume I, pages 68-69 (further page citations will be in the text).

4 L. Gregory Jones, "Saint Jeanette," *The Christian Century* (September 20, 2003): 37.



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