

Did Jesus tell us to pray for our enemies?

## If so, what did he mean?

by [Nijay K. Gupta](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue



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Shortly before standing trial for contempt of Congress, Steve Bannon, former White House chief strategist for President Trump, recorded an episode of his *War Room* podcast in which he vowed to vindicate himself and humiliate his critics. “Pray for our enemies, okay?” he said. “Because we’re going medieval on these people. We’re going to savage our enemies. So pray for them. Who needs prayers? Not MAGA, not *War Room*, and certainly not Stephen K. Bannon.”

While Bannon is known for many things, being overtly religious is not one of them. He was raised Catholic, but he’s not the kind of person one would expect to quote the Bible. Yet he did just that in this unscripted moment. Bannon made no reference to Jesus or the Gospels, but the phrase “pray for our enemies” combines the two halves of Matthew 5:44: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Jesus had a tendency to speak in aphorisms and to reinforce themes in parallel but not identical statements. In the Gospels, “enemies” is a generic label for people who stand on the other side of an issue. “Persecutors,” on the other hand, are people who harass you, who go out of their way to cause you trouble. “Love your enemies” reflects the broad theme of compassion and care for people in an opposing group, while “pray for those who persecute you” is a practical outworking of the love command. Jesus is asking something very difficult of his disciples: love those people who are on the opposite side of the issues that matter to you, and pray for those individuals who are determined to do you harm.

Bannon’s mash-up of these two biblical phrases happened in a stream-of-consciousness tirade. But he isn’t the first person to conflate them. There is a long history of the phrase “pray for your enemies” being used to sum up Jesus’ message.

Christian writers started using the phrase as early as the Didache, a collection of church teachings that likely dates to the end of the first century, just decades after Jesus’ earthly ministry. The beginning of the Didache presents the Christian way of life, repeating the two love commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. As an elaboration, the text paraphrases bits from the Sermon on the Mount: “Bless those who curse you, and pray for your enemies” (1:3). As the Didache recalls Jesus’ teaching in concise form, it collapses “persecutors” and “enemies” into one group: those people on the other side.

Other early Christian writers followed suit. Clement of Alexandria (150–ca. 215) uses this same phrasing in his instruction on caring for neighbors. In a portion of his miscellaneous teachings, he quotes various sayings of Jesus about showing mercy and offering forgiveness. Christians, Clement claims, ought not to rejoice when a pesky neighbor is sick or gloat when a troublemaker has fallen on hard times; they should “pray for their enemies.” The posture of the Christian toward a hostile person is not vengeance but rather to do whatever is necessary to inspire them toward goodness.

Justin Martyr (100–165) likewise promotes enemy love in his *First Apology*. He encourages skeptics of Christianity to look at the lives of believers, observing their change of attitude and behavior after their conversion. Formerly they were full of hate, intent on rivalry, but now they seek unity with all: far from looking for a fight, Christians “pray for our enemies,” wanting all to share in the good things of the gospel. On the subject of love, Justin quotes from Matthew 5, but his wording is

imprecise, as if from a fuzzy memory: “If you love them that love you, what new thing are you doing? For even fornicators do this. But I say to you, pray for your enemies, and love them that hate you, and bless them that curse you, and pray for them that spitefully use you.”

Luther, Calvin, and Bonhoeffer each use “pray for your enemies” to summarize Jesus’ teachings as well. The Christian tradition seems to be especially focused on softening our hearts toward others—not just persecutors, who embody the direct and hostile outworking of enemies who wish harm upon us, but any person or group with whom we might naturally have friction.

Bannon’s use of the phrase piqued my interest because he uttered it like something you might hear as the battle cry before launching a holy war. He was clearly inviting prayer as a curse or a condescending exhortation, as in, *Pray for God’s mercy on our enemies, because we are going to brutalize them!* This sort of prayer reinforces the dividing line between “us” and “them.” Jesus’ radical statement was quite the opposite—*Love your enemies, and pray for a tidal wave of God’s blessings on those very people whom you think are the absolute worst.*

But what exactly did Jesus mean when he taught about loving enemies? It didn’t take long in the early history of Christianity for Matthew’s Gospel to become the church’s favorite book, in large part because of the material that includes the teachings of Jesus. The crown jewel is the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus lays out the ethos of the kingdom of God.

An early section of the sermon focuses on dealing with enemies (Matt. 5:38–48). The Hebraic philosophy of an eye for an eye (Lev. 24:19–21) holds to a standard of equal and fair treatment, in which the punishment fits the crime, but Jesus, as a fastidious student of Torah, takes it further by promoting a personal lifestyle of generosity. Turning the other cheek means showing extra generosity toward others, even and especially toward your enemies. In the world in which Jesus lived, it was common to hear the motto, “Love your friend, hate your enemy,” a refrain that sounds all too familiar today. But Jesus calls for the love of every neighbor, whether friend or foe. This was not a welcome idea for many. *Is it wise to blur the lines of purity and righteousness?* they might have said to him, thinking of Psalm 1. *Should we carelessly keep company with the wicked?*

Jesus points to the example of the heavenly Father, who bestows the warming sun and refreshing rain on all mortals, not just the worthy few. Loving your friends is easy, Jesus says—anyone can do that. It requires no maturity, no labor, no planning or forethought. It is human nature to do good to the people you like. But true greatness requires uncommon charity: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Perfection here does not mean free of any flaw or error. The kind of perfection Jesus calls for is about pursuing a pure love for all, as God loves all.

The point of this passage from the sermon is precisely to erase the lines we draw between the friendly neighbor (who is easy to love) and the enemy or persecutor (who is hard to love). The reality of life is that there will be people who will irritate you and who are hard to get along with. There are people who will relish your misery and want to see you fail.

This scenario comes up later in a parable (Matt. 13:24–29). Jesus compares the kingdom to a field where good seed was planted. At night an “enemy” snuck into the field and planted weeds. Jesus presents this as just the way things are: sometimes you will have a rival farmer who wants to choke out your crops. The way of Christian perfection is not to take revenge on them but to have compassion for them. To want good for them rather than evil shows the power of love.

Luke’s Sermon on the Plain also contains a love teaching of Jesus. “Love your enemies,” Jesus says, “do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27–28). Here, Jesus is even clearer that praying for enemies is about loving them. In fact, this version of Jesus’ teaching implies that the prayer should be one of blessing, not cursing. Put another way, Jesus’ call to prayer for enemies is a call to regard them as friends, not foes.

Looking at the whole of Jesus’ teachings, we can boil enemy prayer down to three things. First, pray with compassion. Jesus repeatedly emphasizes the importance of extending forgiveness, releasing the sinner from guilt, and showing clemency for wrongdoing. This does not mean wrongdoing shouldn’t have consequences. But Jesus’ famous teaching about turning the other cheek is less about forsaking justice and more about showing forbearance with compassion. To pray for one’s enemies is to pray with love for them, seeing the humanity in them.

Second, pray for abundance. The example of God, according to Jesus, is the divine inclination toward grace and giving in abundance (Matt. 5:45; Luke 6:35–36). To

pray for our enemies is to wish—even if it seems wrong—that God would shower them with good things. This is essential to the kingdom’s call to love. Hate treats the other as the object of our scorn; love sees the other as a creature, made by God with care.

Finally, pray for change for the good. It is appropriate that enemy prayer should include praying that the other might change. While Jesus preached love, he didn’t avoid calling out his opponents on their hypocrisy, elitism, greed, or vanity. But even when Jesus was at his most stern and seemingly hostile, his wider intent was to see change happen for the blessing and benefit of all. He practiced what he preached when he said, “Do good to those who hate you” (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27).

None of this is easy. The New Testament occasionally talks about prayer as a form of wrestling (e.g., Col. 4:12). In this way, prayer is sometimes depicted as a theater of battle, as spiritual powers at war with the believer in the thick of it. This prayer-wrestling implies that supplication is often a laborious activity. (Recall the difficulty of Jacob’s wrestling with God!) We go to war with the devil when we pray for gospel glory and kingdom victories, Paul says to the Ephesians (6:10–20).

Praying for our enemies and persecutors is meant to be difficult work. It doesn’t always feel good or seem right. It requires an enlightened way of thinking about those we dislike (or even hate). To pray for them as Jesus would is to pray with love, with compassion, with holy goodness.

This is an ideal, one that sometimes seems unfathomable. Can we really expect a survivor of violence or abuse to pray that God would bless the person who harmed them? Sometimes the right thing to do is just wrestle openly and honestly before God: *I cannot love, show me how to do good little by little*. Paul talks about how the Spirit can help us when words fail us in prayer—with sighs and groans that express the depths of our spiritual agony (Rom. 8:26). What matters most is a soft heart before God and openness to being changed by the kingdom ways modeled by the Son of God and Son of man.

Jesus may not have commanded his disciples, “pray for your enemies,” in those specific words, but he intended for them to do just that. As with his dying breath he uttered, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34), so he held out hope for a more generous world. To pray “to hell with them” is human. To pray “give me love for them and show them mercy” is divine.