

## How to Treat Your Enemies

Romans 12:14

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

I was coming through the Fourth Street door this morning and just happened to look over in the parking lot to the corner spot where the two fences meet. And there I saw a little Fiat two-seater and on the bumper was a sticker that read, "Can marriage work?" And further along the bumper, it said, "8 a.m. 1570 AM" and I thought, "Ah! I have a friend whose marriage is in difficulty, I must tell him tomorrow morning to turn on the radio at 15:17 AM at 8 o'clock and maybe it will help him. I thought, that's a good idea, and then I thought -- that's my car!" (Laughter) And if you want to do the same thing for your friend, do it loved ones, as they are available to listen to.

Why I said that was that I wanted to explain to you how we do the radio recordings. I record the little 9 minute slots at home on a tape recorder and then I bring it in here and Tim puts it together with a song and puts the broadcast together. One great advantage of that is when my chair squeaks or my little dog barks at home, Tim can erase that and can produce a pretty flawless tape. He can wipe out all the mistakes and all the errors and can produce a tape that is free from those. It's the same with the video taping that is going on now of this sermon -- it has the same great advantage: you can take the sermon as it's preached now, this morning and you can wipe out all the mistakes and all the clumsy repetitions or hesitations, and you can come up with what seems a pretty flawless sermon. And that is a great advantage of recording; whether you record audio or you record video, you can take the thing as it was originally produced and you can make it perfect.

Wouldn't it be great if you could do that with your life? It would be so nice if you could take the version that you and I live, day-to-day, with all our sins and all our mistakes and all our errors and all our blemishes, and then if we could erase all that and re-record the whole life, perfect and flawless, with all those things wiped out. It would be so great if you could arrange somehow that that re-recording could be played inside your heart with all the right responses to all your circumstances; all the right motives, all the right initiatives and you could allow that to be the version that's heard by all of the rest of us and seen by all of the rest of us, here on earth.

That's what has happened. That's what God did with his great computer-like mind. He was able to foresee the life that you and I would live in every detail. He was able to read the kind of things that we would do when we came up against the circumstances that he foresaw would take place in our lives and he, with his great, complex mind, was able to run that whole life through his foresight. And then he was able to put that life in his son Jesus and in a great eternal death above time and space, he was able to erase all that and then he was able to re-record your life as it was meant to be: perfect and flawless. You and I are watching, in our present day lives, this first, un-edited version. You observe not only your mistakes and your errors but you observe your sins, your vices, your wrong motives, your wrong intentions and your wrong attitudes. That's the version that you and I are observing.

But loved ones there is an edited and corrected version of your life in Jesus and God is able to play that over again inside your heart so that you are able to listen to it. His spirit is able to connect us up with that library in Heaven, that library in eternity that is filled as even Plato when he wrote his "Republic" was sensing even though he knew nothing of Jesus. He talked too, about the perfect form. He used to say "There are tables but then there is a perfect table, somewhere in

the great beyond, where there, one true good exists” and that’s the situation. The Holy Spirit is able to take from that library, that, as your perfect life, resurrected and recorded in Jesus. He is able to take it and bring it here to you in the midst of time and space and to play it over again inside you so that you begin to listen to your life as it was meant to be lived.

Loved ones, how do you enter into it? Not, by effort, not by struggle, not by trying to dig yourself out bit by bit from your vices and from your sins and your bad habits. But you are able to do it by faith, by believing that this is the very thing that God has done in his Son, Jesus. By believing that and then by listening to the playing of that, through his Spirit, you are able to be changed in a moment, you are. That’s exactly what Paul meant when he explained in Ephesians 2:1,6: “Those of us who were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once walked,” that first version, “have been raised by God and made to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Have been -- he was pointing to the fact that this has already been done and that that version of our lives is available to us now.

That’s why to the Romans (Romans 6:6, 11) he said, “Our old self” the old version of our lives, “was crucified” was erased with Christ, “so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin. “So consider yourselves dead to sin”, consider your past life erased and wiped out in eternity, and that you are now “alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Just believe that; have faith in that and God’s spirit will begin to play that version of your life over again inside you. That’s loved ones, what Paul spends the first eleven chapters of Romans doing; outlining that gospel -- that’s the gospel. If you believe that, you can begin to experience that flawless life beginning to operate inside you and all you have to do is let that come out to the rest of us, that’s it. That’s why they say you are saved by faith and not by effort. It’s by believing that and letting that happen in you that the change is brought.

And then in chapter 12 he says, “Now, in the light of this miracle that God has wrought for you, what kind of behavior on your part will enable this new version of your life to be played inside you miraculously, by the Holy Spirit?” And then you remember he gets down to details, and it’s one of those details that we are studying today in Romans 12:14:, and in the light of this that has happened he says “Bless those who persecute you: bless and do not curse them.” Bless them? The answer to that is given in one of the earliest persecutions that is recorded in the Bible. You remember the persecution of Joseph by his brothers? You remember he at times was unwise about the way he talked of his calling by God to be a special person and they grew jealous of him and they opposed him. And eventually they threw him down a pit and he was sold into slavery. He then met with them years later, towards the end of his father’s life, and he explained what the reality behind that whole series of events was, and this is why we should bless those who persecute us.

Look at it in Genesis 50:15-21, “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil which we did to him.’ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, ‘Your father gave this command before he died, say to Joseph, forgive I pray you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you. And now, we pray you; forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.’ Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him, and said, ‘Behold, we are your servants.’ But Joseph said to them, ‘Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ Thus he reassured them and comforted them.”

That's why you bless those who persecute you; because they mean it for evil but God intends it for good. Joseph had no doubt that God had already played his life right through in his eternal mind and then had gone back through with his editing machine, and had edited out all the stuff in it that would affect him adversely as far as his purpose in existence here in the world is concerned and as far as his eternal destiny is concerned. And Joseph was absolutely sure that what God had left in his life was not going to do him any harm that would matter and so he was absolutely confident. "Sure, you have persecuted me, you meant it for evil but I knew God intended it for good." In other words loved ones, you bless those who persecute you because you are confident that God has already drawn the fangs of the snake; he's drawn out the venom and he has allowed the snake to bite you because in fact, he can work some purpose for his own glory through that. But the actual poison that would destroy you, he has already drawn out and cast aside. And that's why that verse in Roman 8:28 runs, "God is working for good in all things, in the lives of those who love him." So even with those who persecute you God has already run that part of the tape through and he has taken out of it anything that would do you real harm and whatever he has left in it, is only there for your good.

So, it is as if God has drawn the teeth of the lion; he has neutralized the power of your persecutors to do you any real harm and what is now coming to you is what has been screened lovingly through God's own hands. And that's why in I Thessalonians, we're exhorted to give thanks in all circumstances, for all things, for this is the will of God for us in Christ Jesus. So, loved ones, those who persecute you, or who want evil to happen to you, are in the hands of God and what you are receiving now from them, is only as much, as will do you good. They are the servants of Satan but God has transformed them into his unknowing servants so that the things that he is allowing them to do to you, are things that will draw you deeper into his own heart and then to himself. So there is no place for saying, "Oh why are they persecuting me, why are they opposing me, why is this person doing this or why are they stopping me doing that?" They are not stopping you doing anything. They think they are stopping you doing all kinds of things but they are only stopping what God allows them to stop you doing and those are things that are non-essential. And all the while he is using them to draw you into a life of greater and greater reality.

That's why we should bless them and not curse them: we should bless them because they are being used by God to work his own good. You might want to look at that in I Thessalonians 5:18, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Give thanks in all circumstances, whatever they are like; whether you are being opposed at every turn or whether things are easy - give thanks in all circumstances, for this present set of circumstances that you have were lovingly played through by God, examined by him and the evil has been edited out and what is left is what is good for you; it's the will of God for you, in Christ Jesus.

Why else bless those who persecute you? Because you are affirming what has happened in Calvary. There is a verse in Colossians 2:15 that says that God in Christ disarmed the principalities and powers. In other words he took all the elemental spirits of the universe, all the anger, antagonism, resentment, criticism and destructive power and he disarmed them. He has triumphed over them in the death of Jesus, and yet in a way that they can work and appear to express all kinds of anger against you, all kinds of opposition, all kinds of criticism. But the anger has been taken away as far as its power to destroy you is concerned. God has triumphed over that in Jesus.

He has disarmed the principalities and powers and he has made a triumph over them in his son. You see, we wrestle not against flesh and blood, it's not that terrible person that you meet week by week - that's not who we wrestle against. We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of darkness in this present world (Ephesians 6:12).

Jesus has destroyed their power to affect your life. So when you bless those who persecute you, you set loose among them that power that alone can do anything with them. Naturally, all your opposition and your response to them and your ranting and your resentment can do nothing. In fact that will just makes them madder and madder. But when you bless them, you set loose and affirm the victory that God has wrought in Jesus over their anger and over their enmity and their hostility to you. So actually you do the only thing that affects anything -- you do the one thing that results in any kind of holding back of their power.

Another reason why you need to bless them is it keeps you free in your heart; keeps you clean. You know the way you get when you go home at night and you go over it again and again: "he said this and she said that and then he said that and look what he did to me." First of all you have lost a night's sleep, but you also filled your own heart with poison and resentment and criticism. William Penn is right when he said that when you get angry with another person, you do yourself far more harm than you do the other person. And it is so: when you resent those who persecute you -- that's when the harm is done. The harm is not done when they are persecuting you, the harm is done as you mull over it in your mind and go over it again and again and that's why you should bless. Bless them. Say, "Lord thank you that you used this person to begin to drive me deeper into your own heart and to work some of Jesus' life in me, thank you Lord for that. I want to bless them for that, because they were your unknowing servants and I thank you for that." And loved ones, as you do that your heart is filled with whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report and your own heart is brought into peace. But above all you are living in reality; your God hasn't left you defenseless.

Remember when Satan said about Job: "you have a hedge round about him"

(Job 1:10). God never said he hadn't. God has a hedge round about you and me and anything he lets through that hedge, he does it because he knows he can work something in your life through it. He has taken out everything from that wild animal that goes through that hedge; he has de-fanged that animal. He has taken all the poison and venom out of the snake so that it can do you no real harm but can only work in your life the purposes that God has. So loved ones, that's why you should bless those who persecute you, bless and don't curse them, don't want evil against them but bless them and thank God for them. Why? Because anything else is unreality. He's already taken care of them, He's already taken care of that. Don't go out after the illusion that Satan tries to get you to believe that they are doing you some real harm; they aren't -- they can't do you any harm. They can't do anything that God will not allow them to do to you.

Persecute you? Who are the people that persecute you? The people in the first century were in no doubt of the answer to that. They preached very clearly that the Roman State religion was not the clearest revelation of God, nor were the Jewish laws the clearest revelation of God, but the clearest revelation of God, and in fact the only salvation, was through Jesus; the only begotten Son of God. And because they claimed that Jesus was the only way to God and because they claimed that he was absolute truth, people began to oppose them. They hated them because they wouldn't allow for their religion. The Romans would have been happy if the Christians had been prepared to add Jesus to the panoply of Gods. But they wouldn't do that, they said, "No, your gods are not gods; Jesus is the only Son of God and his Father is the only God." It was the same with the Jewish laws; they wanted to say "all right - we take him in as Rabbi, as another teacher" but the Christians kept saying, "No, he is the only way to God; he is the final revelation of God." So from that day, every authority figure that wanted to explain away some disaster that was coming upon his people or upon those who trusted him, blamed the Christians.

You remember that in 64 A.D., a tremendous fire broke out in Rome and it was thought that it could

be traced back to Nero, the emperor. He was determined to get the blame off his shoulders and so he blamed that on the Christians. So the Christians were the persecuted yet once more. Here's how Tacitus describes it - Tacitus was not a Christian, but was the well known historian of imperial Rome and a pagan of pagans -- but even he was touched as he described what happened: "Therefore, in order to suppress the rumor, Nero falsely charged and punished with the most exquisite tortures (or the most extreme tortures) those persons who were commonly called Christians. The founder of that name, Christus had been put to death by the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. But the pernicious superstition repressed for a time, broke out again, not only through Judea, the source of this evil but also through the city. Accordingly, first those only were arrested who confessed. Next, on their information, a vast multitude was convicted-- not so much of the crime of incendiarism as of hatred of the human race. And in their deaths they were made the subjects of sport; for they were wrapped in the hides of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs or nailed to crosses and set on fire and when they declined, were burnt to serve for nocturnal lights. Nero had offered his own gardens for this spectacle and also exhibited in that chariot race on the occasion. Now, mingling in the crowd in the dress of charioteer, now actually holding the reins, from where a feeling of compassion arose towards the sufferers, though justly held to be odious because they seem not to be cut off for the public good but as victims to the ferocity of one man."

So, a woman - a Christian woman, standing in Nero's garden at that moment, would be looking at her husband, who was tied to a wooden stake that was driven into the ground and he himself was covered with oil and pitch and tar, and his head was burning in the light, and she would watch the flames engulfing his face and then his body and then she would look at Nero, as he clowned among the spectators and joked and she would want for him that he would know that he had been changed in Jesus' death and he had been made new. And she would want with all her heart in the deepest place of her being, that he should experience the peace and love of God, at that very moment. That's what blessing those who persecute you means. Those who persecute you are those who oppose you, not because they are competing with you for your job or for the boss's favor, not because they are trying to make life awkward for you, not because they are trying to make life difficult at home for you or they are trying to stop you succeeding in your career or they are talking about you behind your back or they are gossiping about you or they are trying to take you down - those are just enemies or neighbors that Jesus says you are to love as a matter of course. But those who persecute you are those who oppose you for righteousness sake, because you stand up for righteousness in your personal daily life. Strange thing is nobody much opposes forgiveness of sins; everybody is for that -- forgiveness of sins, who would oppose forgiveness of sins? Who would oppose the idea that we'll all go to heaven? Nobody is persecuting anybody for that and nobody persecuted the Christians for that in the first century, that's just Judaism and nobody opposes that.

But if you once believe that Jesus, by his death, is able to save you from sin in this present life and is able to give you the power to live above anger and envy and jealousy and that we are meant to live that way and you stand up for that in your own personal life by your own actions and by your own thoughts and by your own words, then the demons of hell will be released upon you. That's it, and when that happens, when persecution comes to you in that way, then God tells us, "bless them." Because at that very moment, when they are trying to suppress the expression of Jesus' life from you through the beauty of your own life, at that very moment if you bless them, you will invoke and release the power of Jesus' resurrection upon them and the Holy Spirit will begin to work in their hearts and will begin to fill them with that sweetness and fragrance of Jesus.

There is a lot of silliness talked about persecution -- a lot of silliness -- and we should just stop all the silliness. "Thank God the communists aren't here; thank God the anti-Christ isn't here."

Now, let's stop all this silly talk about what's going to happen then. Who knows what will happen then? Maybe you will run like a coward when that comes; you can't tell what will happen then. But here in this present life, we have a nation that is dying because it is religious but is not moral. It is filled with moral majority claims, but its people in their ordinary everyday lives, persist in saying it is right to be angry, it is right to be jealous, it is normal to hate other people and to criticize them, to have resentment towards them and it's normal and human to have lust in your heart and to be unclean in your practices. We have a nation that is filled with sin and it badly needs some people who will begin to live in the power of Jesus' deliverance from sin in their daily life. And the moment you do that the persecution begins to come to you and then it is that you need to bless them so that you may continue to minister life to them.

So I think we should thank God we are not in Siberia, thank God there is no danger of that at this moment; but see that there is persecution wherever Jesus' power is allowed to express itself in the human life, and you will find that too. I think the Christians in Nero's time could have got out of it; they could have compromised and said, "Jesus is just another Prophet, Jesus is just another god" and you and I can do the same. I don't know how much we are doing, but you and I can present the part of the gospel that people love and keep away from living the part that Satan hates -- the life that has a pure heart, a clean conscience and a sincere faith. We live in the midst of a religious nation that says "Purity of heart is impossible; you just do your best to keep it as pure as you can but purity is impossible, clean conscience is impossible; that's why you come to God day after day and ask forgiveness for your sins. And sincere faith -- well we have as strong a faith as we can." Loved ones, the moment you and I start living with a pure heart, a clean conscience, a sincere faith - that moment persecution begins to come. And then we have the glory of God beginning to come upon us as we bless those who curse us and the imperative here means "keep on blessing, keep on blessing, bless again and again as they persecute again and again, and keep away from cursing them, but keep on blessing them, again and again, day after day."

I pray that God will lead you into the life that will enable you to experience persecution - real persecution. And that you will bless those who persecute you.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you for delivering us from all the foolishness about persecution and when we think of that dear lady, who was only one among millions, and Lord when we think of the Catacombs that extend for 150 miles and have nine million bodies in them, I think, Lord, of that statement that the seed of a church is the blood of the martyrs. And when we think of that woman seeing her husband burning alive as Nero joked and clowned and then we think of the thousands who took their children by their hands and were torn apart by wild beasts, Lord we see that our peril is the lack of persecution rather than persecution. And Lord we aim to be what you have died to make us; we aim to be men and women from this day forward who will live with pure hearts and clean consciences and with a sincere faith and that life of victory over sin that Satan hates and that rebels against you oppose. And Lord we thank you that you have given us a position in Jesus that enables us to bless them and to thank you that they can do nothing to us except those things that will bring us deeper into your own heart. Lord, we thank you that this is true for all the circumstances of our lives and that our lives are in your hands and thus the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord and so are the hearts of all who we meet day-by-day in our work and at home. We thank you Lord.

Now, the Grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. Amen

