

Black Book, Good Book  
Matthew 5:38-48  
February 20, 2011

One of my all-time favorite actors is John Wayne, and one of my all-time favorite movies of his is *The Quiet Man*. In that movie, John Wayne's character must battle his love interest's brother, Red Will Danaher. Danaher is an Irish landowner who seems to have few friends because of his belligerent nature. In fact, Danaher has a "Yes Man" whose main job it seems is to keep a record of all of the people Will doesn't like. When offended, Danaher will say, "Feeney, take out your book. Write the name [name of the offender]. Now, strike a line through it!"

I hope you don't have a little book in which you keep the names of all those who have offended you over the years. However, while you may not have an actual book, perhaps you have a virtual book in your mind. If so, Jesus has a word for us on that book of revenge. Our passage for today is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Those of you who just got back from Israel, go back in your mind to that hillside that overlooks the Sea of Galilee; picture the crowds of people seated there, listening to the new sounding teachings of this unique Rabbi.

In our passage today from Matthew, Jesus intentionally misquotes from the book of Leviticus. *You have heard it said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy."* Actually, the *Love your neighbor* part comes directly from Leviticus 19:18, but the *hate your enemy* part is something added by Jesus. He didn't make it up on the spot. He was only using the verse the way most of the Jewish community used it. They had taken a concept in the scripture and molded it to fit what they wanted to be true. It's kind of like people believing the saying, "God helps those who help themselves," is in the Bible. It sounds logical, but it's not there.

In this case, the people of Israel had adopted a dualistic approach to love. If they were required to love their neighbor (ie., their fellow Israelites), the obvious inference to them was that they should hate their enemies. This was probably a natural thing to think, considering the fact that they had seen God command the destruction of their enemies many times. They must have taken that destruction to mean that God hated their enemies, so it must be alright for them to hate them as well. They believed that their hate represented God's judgment. The one thing they seemed to forget, however, was that they were not God. If God hates something it is because it is sinful and His anger is just. As human beings our very natures are characterized by sin, so our hate is tainted with sin, therefore it cannot be entirely just.

Jesus inserted the statement to bring to the forefront Israel's erroneous practice of the Law. Whose name is recorded in *your* mental Black Book today? Is it the person who cut you off in traffic? Is it the co-worker who stole your idea and then took credit for it? Maybe it's someone in the church who isn't acting exactly the way you would have them act.

As Jesus talked to the crowd, they must have been scratching their heads when Jesus turned the saying on its head. *But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.* (Matt 5:44-45) Jesus was redefining the terms of love. According to Jesus, enemies were also neighbors. He later explained the concept more when he told what we have come to call the Parable of the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10)

In that story, an expert in the Law wanted clarification on who exactly his neighbor was so that he would know who he was supposed to love, and more importantly...who he didn't have to love. Jesus educated him by telling the story of how a Samaritan man helped an injured Israelite. Remember, the Israelites didn't like the Samaritans, and vice versa. And Jesus' teaching made it very clear: A neighbor is anyone in need. We are to worry less about who our neighbor is, and more about being a good neighbor to everyone. It's less about *who* we are to love, and more about *how* we are to love.

But Jesus didn't stop there. As if His command to love one's enemy wasn't enough, Jesus went a step further. Not only were His followers expected to love their enemies, they were also to *pray* for them. Can you imagine!?! It's one thing to try to love someone while you are in their presence. It's another thing entirely to lift them before the throne of God in prayer in their absence.

In this teaching, Jesus is continuing to communicate something new to you and me. Our internal spiritual life has a direct bearing on the way we interact externally with other people and the world.

We are to imitate God. God hates sin. Yet, while we were still sinners he demonstrated His gracious love for us through the person and work of His son, Jesus the Christ.

Maybe like the people who listened to Jesus on that hillside so long ago, you, too are scratching your head about loving and praying for your enemies. How can we love those who hate us? How can we show kindness to those who have hurt us?

The only way we can do it is to imitate our brother, Jesus. We have to tap into the power of God available to each one of us through the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit can make us over into the likeness of Christ. Only then can we pray for our enemies the way Christ did from the cross when he prayed, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*"

Folks, this is the hard stuff. This is advanced Christianity. Praying for your enemy is the kind of practice that can transform your heart and your life. Doing this is one way we practice being Resurrection People.

God threw away His black book with *your* name in it because of His grace.

Can you do any less for others?