

Question 4: Loving Our Enemies

Question 4: As Christians, we are supposed to love our enemies. How is it that David is called a man after God's own heart, yet is commended for slaying tens of thousands?

That is a great question because David is one of the best examples in scripture of what it means to hate your enemies biblically and to love your enemies biblically at the same time.

At first, it seems like a contradiction in God's Word. The instruction of the New Testament to love our enemies is well known. Matthew 5:43-44 and Romans 12:9-21 are notable examples. In the first passage, Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you..." and in the second passage, Paul explains how we are to leave vengeance to God and do good to our enemies.

Some people see this teaching of the New Testament as a corrective of the teaching of the Old Testament where you have people like David commended for killing enemies. But this is a complete misunderstanding. In fact, the instruction of the New Testament to love our enemies and to do good to them is actually based upon the teaching of the Old Testament. When Jesus says, "You have heard it said... but I say to you," in the Matthew 5 passage, He has already made it clear that He is not changing one little thing from the Old Testament. He is correcting what everyone had heard in his day from those who claimed to expound the Old Testament. Jesus is correcting these false interpretations and setting forth the true exposition. In the Romans 12 passage about loving our enemies, Paul is actually expounding Proverbs 25:21 which he actually quotes. Proverbs 25:21-22 says: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; For *so* you will heap coals of fire on his head, And the LORD will reward you." So what we have in the New Testament is not a revision of God's Word, but rather a return to the true instruction of God's Word that had been distorted by tradition and bad teaching.

What's more, in the New Testament, you also have examples of biblical hatred of enemies, as with the martyrs in Rev. 6:10:

"And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'"

These martyrs, who died at the hands of those who hated their Lord, are eager to see their persecutors (as a class) brought to justice. While they prayed for their repentance and while many of them did repent, the persecution was still going on and they pray that justice would be brought to these persecutors. In Luke 18:7, you have Jesus' promise to those who pray such prayers. He says:

"And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?"

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They may have to wait a long time, but God will judge. And when this judgement comes, there is great rejoicing called for in heaven:

Re 18:20: "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her!"

Related to this, you have Paul's explanation in Romans 13 that the civil magistrate is God's minister or agent whose duty it is to be "an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil." And you have him praying an imprecatory prayer against Alexander the Coppersmith in 2 Tim 4:14. So you have this same tension between loving enemies and hating enemies in both the Old and New Testament.

So what do we learn from David to help us clear this up? David gives us a wonderful example of biblical hatred of enemies and biblical love of enemies. We learn from him what it means to truly have a heart after God when it comes to dealing with enemies.

In 1 Samuel, we are given an extensive treatment of Saul's mistreatment of David. Saul pursues him with malice and hatred, tells lies about him, and tries to kill him. But David constantly returns kindness to Saul. He is an amazing example of what Proverbs 25:21-22 calls us to do when it calls us to love our enemy. He presents his conduct in this regard before the LORD in Psalm 35:11-14 when he says:

"Fierce witnesses rise up; They ask me *things* that I do not know. They reward me evil for good, *To* the sorrow of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, My clothing *was* sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting; And my prayer would return to my own heart. I paced about as though *he were* my friend *or* brother; I bowed down heavily, as one who mourns *for his* mother."

This is precisely how we should treat our personal enemies. David did this for years.

But David has a very different attitude toward those who are the Lord's enemies. In this, we see clearly how he is a man after God's own heart. When, as the Lord's anointed, David is instructed to wipe out the Lord's enemies, he does so without hesitation. He hates them, as he says in Psalm 139, with a "perfect hatred." Saul, on the other hand, who pursued David for personal reasons, spares the Lord's enemies, even those the Lord has told him to destroy! It was this "mercy" on Saul's part in refusing to kill the king of the Amalekites that led to the kingdom being taken from him. This is plainly stated in 1 Sam 28:16-18:

"Then Samuel said: 'Why then do you ask me, seeing the Lord has departed from you and has become your enemy? And the Lord has done for Himself as He spoke by me. For the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbour, David. Because you did not obey the voice of the Lord nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the Lord has done this thing to you this day.'

Saul, you see, is quite ready to do harm to his own enemies, even to those who are enemies without cause, but quite reluctant to do harm to God's enemies, even though as King he has been clearly instructed to do so! This is like rulers today who look the other

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way when children are aborted, but go after someone who threatens their political career. The Amalekites, you will remember, made themselves obnoxious to the LORD when they attacked the weaker Hebrews at the end of the line. That is why God commanded that Saul (as king) act as his avenger of this wrong by slaying the Amalekites.

But look at David's attitude toward the Lord's enemies. The Philistines were among the people that after 400 years of patience with their wickedness, the Lord had commanded Israel to wipe out. They were His enemies. But the Philistines had survived the days of Joshua because of Israel's disobedience. This is why David is praised as a warrior in Israel for slaying the Philistines. And one place where you get a marvellous picture of his heart in this (that he was not just one of those guys who happens to enjoy being a killing machine) is in the account of his slaying of Goliath. This very important point is often overlooked because there is so much focus on David's youthfulness and Goliath's size and such things. So take a look at what it is that stirs David's heart against Goliath! In 1 Sam 17:26, he says,

“For who *is* this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

In chapter 18, he repeats these same sentiments to the giant: 1 Sam 18:45-47:

“Then David said to the Philistine, ‘You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle *is* the LORD'S, and He will give you into our hands.’”

You can see clearly what David's great concern is! It is not his own fame or his love of being a hero. It is not even primarily his concern for his people, but it is the honour of the LORD that he cares about. That is what propels him to act. That is how he is a man after God's own heart who slays tens of thousands of Philistines!