

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 1/29/2024

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, January 30 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for your enemies. Pray for those with whom you disagree or don't like. Consider their needs and ask GOD to meet them according to GOD's will.*

On the one hand, following JESUS is easy. HIS expectations for HIS followers are clear to understand.

In Mark 12:30-31, JESUS says, *"Love the LORD your GOD with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*

In Matthew 5:43-44, JESUS instructs, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*

Pretty simple. Love GOD. Love your neighbors. Love your enemies. That's it. Basically, love everyone.

But actually carrying out those instructions is not always so easy. Loving GOD can seem simple enough. Until those events happen in life that call us to question GOD and GOD's intent. How do you love GOD when someone dear is taken from you? How do you love GOD when a debilitating illness or difficult situation occurs? Especially if you place the responsibility for events like these squarely upon GOD? This can make loving GOD a challenge. It is only when we count the blessing of the time with one who was loved, or our life, or the help of those who seek to cure us or carry us through as coming from GOD, that we can still thank GOD and continue to love GOD.

Loving our neighbors, treating others the way we wish to be treated, isn't that hard—depending on how you define "neighbor." If you're talking about family and people you like, we don't have to give much thought to loving. But what happens when we expand the definition of "neighbor" as JESUS does? In the story of the Good Samaritan, JESUS indicates that our neighbor is anyone who is in need. Again, when that person in need is someone we like, it's not a challenge to offer our help. But what about when it is somebody you don't know? Someone you would rather not deal with? Someone you don't want to be around? This is when loving our neighbor becomes difficult and may push us to our limits. But that can be a good thing, too. It can lead us to pause and consider GOD's love for us even when we are undeserving, and even when we are not so loveable. GOD shows that love to us so that we might follow this example in our love for others.

And, well, loving our enemies certainly is the hard one. Think about the people in the world with whom you disagree, whom you oppose, whom you can't stand, to whom your nature is to wish ill. And JESUS wants you to love them? That's just plain hard. How do you love those you, well, hate? The best place to begin is to pray for them. To discipline yourself to think about what that disliked person needs and then ask GOD to grant a blessing upon them. Don't pray that they become more like you want them to be. Ask that GOD meet them where they are at and provide for them in the same way you would want to be cared for. Paul says that by doing so, we heap burning coals on their head. Sounds like the kind of treatment we might like for our enemies to receive. But the practice in ancient times when someone came to your home in the cold of night was to place a cloth around their head and then place coals from the fire on the cloth so that your guest might be warmed. Praying for your enemy can be the first step to changing their feelings toward you—warming them up to you—and changing your feelings toward them.

On its surface, loving others—loving everyone sounds like an easy task. But doing so is challenging. If we think about it, though, the benefits become clear. And, first and foremost, it is what GOD has done for us and what JESUS wants us to do for others.

In CHRIST's love,
Pastor Jeffrey