

Fire-breathing dragons... and other people you have to live and work with

4 in The Greatest Sermon in History

Sermon for Sunday, April 25, 2010
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The Greatest Sermon in History is the message given by Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew 5-7. This series aims to apply Jesus' timeless truths to the situations that people face today.

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48

1) 3 specific ways to make someone like you

Is there someone in your life who doesn't like you? You try to be nice to this person, but he/she still thinks you're a jerk. Maybe nothing is spoken out loud, but you can feel the tension whenever you are around this other person. That can be very draining emotionally. I call these people "fire-breathing dragons."

Here are three simple and proven strategies you can use to make someone else like you. They are guaranteed to work:

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You get the point? You have absolutely no control over what other people think about you. If you go around worrying about what other people are thinking about you, and doing everything you can to try to please them, you're just going to make yourself sick. Even Mother Teresa had people who didn't like her: some in her Order didn't like her because they thought her rules are too strict; some social workers didn't like her because they think that by focussing all her efforts on helping the destitute, she is actually reinforcing the social ills that causes such poverty. If someone as saintly as Mother Teresa has people who don't like her, then you and I don't have much chance!

2) God is the one we should strive to please

1 Thessalonians 2:4, 6, 10, New International Version:

We do not try to please people, but to please God, who tests our motives... We did not try to get praise from anyone, either from you or from others... You are our witnesses and so is God.

Let's face it: you know that you are a fine, wonderful human being, a person of integrity. God knows the real you. That is the main thing.

Now please don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying to forget about that other person. I'm just saying, don't let someone else's negative attitude control your life. There still are things we need to do when we're in a situation like this. The difference is in the motive. If our motive is to make someone else like us, we're in for trouble. If our motive is to obey Christ, and follow his example, then life will be much more satisfying.

Let's look into the Greatest Sermon in History, and see just what Jesus had to say on how to deal with difficult people.

3) Fighting back doesn't work

Let's say the person we have trouble with is a real jerk. (Never mind the fact that he or she thinks the same thing about us — we know we're perfect, and the problem is all their fault.) He/she does things to us just to be mean and spiteful. Oh, wouldn't it feel good to get even! That's a very common tactic, even in Jesus day:

Matthew 5:43, New International Version:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' "

But of course it doesn't work. Two wrongs don't make a right. Adding evil to evil doesn't produce good. Paul echoed Jesus' words when he wrote his letter to the Romans:

Romans 12:14-21, New International Version:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... Live in harmony with one another. ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In a hockey game, if two players start fighting, they both get thrown in the penalty box. When the referee comes over, he doesn't ask, "Now, boys, who started this?"

Unfair? Absolutely yes! But Jesus wasn't talking about fairness. Imagine if God treated us "fairly" for all the bad things we've ever done! No, Jesus wants us to achieve something far greater than mere fairness.

4) Love is a verb

Here it is. Three simple words: "Love your enemies."

Matthew 5:43-44, New International Version:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies.”

Love can mean many things. It can be a warm feeling: “I think I’m in love.” That’s nice, but it’s not enough when you’re dealing with a fire breathing dragon.

“Love” is a verb. It means action. Not just nice thoughts. It means becoming involved.

Jesus goes on to give us several specific ways we live love for our dragons.

5) Pray for your dragons

The very first thing Jesus tells us is this:

Matthew 5:44, Today’s English Version:

“Pray for those who persecute you.”

What do we pray for? Two things.

a) Pray for God’s blessing — for them, not yourself!

Luke 6 contains Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, and he includes something that got left out in Matthew’s record:

Luke 6:27, New International Version:

“Bless those who curse you.”

Pray for good things to happen in their lives. Now, our automatic reaction is to say, “I can’t pray for someone I don’t like.” That’s not true. In fact, it is the very opposite that is true: You can’t dislike someone you pray for. When we start praying for our dragons, we find that the loathing, the fear, even the hate is replaced by something else: love.

b) Pray to forgive them

Mark 11:25, Living Bible:

“When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive you your sins too.”

Again, our automatic reaction is to say, “Well that’s very nice, Jesus. But you surely don’t mean that so-and-so who did such-and-such to me!” I believe Jesus would reply to us, “That is precisely what I mean. In fact, the more that you hate someone, the more you need to forgive them. That hatred is destroying you from the inside, far more than your enemy on the outside.”

In August 1983, Russell Stendal was taken hostage in the jungle of Colombia, South America, by a band of guerrilla soldiers. For nearly 5 months he learned what it really means to love one’s enemies. He wrote a letter home, saying, “I am in danger only of losing my life; they are in danger in losing their souls.” Russell was kind to his guards at every opportunity, and they became like friends. One day the commander told him, “We can’t kill you face to face; we like you. So we will have to kill you in your sleep.” Russell forgave them for what was about to happen. For the next 10 days and nights a machine gun was repeatedly thrust in his face under his mosquito net, but the guards couldn’t bring themselves to pull the trigger. On January 3, 1984, Russell was released. When he said goodbye, many of the guerrillas were openly weeping.

6) Do good to those who hate you

This verse again comes from Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount:

Luke 6:27-28, New International Version:

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”

Danny Moe, a pastor in British Columbia, relates this story just as it was told to him:

“When I was in the army, there was one fellow who got religion. I and all the other fellows would give him a hard time, but it never bothered him. Every night, right there in front of all the rest of us, he would kneel by his bunk and pray.

“One rainy, cold night he came in off guard duty. He was cold and wet, but he still got down on his knees. I was just getting into bed, and as I took off my army boots, I let one of them fly, hitting him right on the head, sending him reeling across the floor. I laughed and rolled over in bed.”

“The next morning I went looking for my boots. I found them sitting neatly at the foot of my bed, beautifully polished. When I saw that polish gleaming, that was when I asked Christ to come into my life.”

7) Remember why we do this

Some of these stories I’ve told end with the fire-breathing dragons having a change of heart. Sometimes it happens; most of the time it won’t. But let us remember: our motive for loving enemies is *not* to make them change. If that is what you live for, to make people like you, then you will only be sick and miserable. The reason is simple: that is a selfish attitude. It is all about ME.

Loving our enemies requires an entirely different attitude. It is all about THEM. It is all about JESUS. And that makes all the difference.

Prayer after message:

Jesus, we bow before you in prayer.

You did some amazing things during your life on earth. And you call us to follow you, to follow your example and teaching. But sometime's that's hard. But what if you came into my life today? Now that would be really amazing!

I have some doubts, some questions... but I also have faith. I believe in you, Jesus. I believe you can do what you said. And I believe you can help me do what you said. I believe your promise.

So I'm asking you to do it: come into my life, into my heart.

Forgive me for my sins, the times I've hurt you and hurt others. Make me clean and whole once again.

Fill me with your Holy Spirit, so that I may follow you and obey you always. Amen.

Theme for today: Someone once asked General Robert E. Lee about a certain officer, and Lee gave a glowing account of that person. A soldier who overheard this conversation was astonished. "General," he said, "do you know that the man you spoke so highly of is one of your worst enemies, and that he misses no opportunity to slander you?" "Yes," said the General, "but I was asked for my opinion of him, not his of me."

That's the key for following Jesus when it comes to loving our enemies: it's about how we treat them, not the other way around.