

**“Perfect Love”
by Donne Hayden**

“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, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

—Matthew 5:43-48, NIV

This translation in the *New International Version* is pretty clear, but because I want to make a point, here is my paraphrase of the same passage:

“In earlier times, your priests and teachers told you, “Care for your neighbor and hate your enemy.”

But I am here to contradict that: Care for your enemies. Pray for those who are unkind to you, for those who make your life difficult, so that you may be true children of God—God, who causes the sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and who sends rain on those who do right and those who do wrong.

If you are kind to those who are kind to you, why do you deserve credit for doing so? Don’t even the worst people care for those who care for them?

And if you are kind only to those familiar to you, how are you different from anyone else? Don’t even unbelievers do that?

Be complete and comprehensive in your kindness to others; love as God loves.

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” says the original translation. When the Gospel of Matthew was written, the word “*telios*,”

translated in this passage as “perfect,” meant “whole,” “complete,” “lacking nothing necessary to completeness.” It was “comprehensive” as in “comprehensive insurance” which covers everything. Reading backward in this passage, we discover *how* we are to be “perfect” or “complete,” i.e., by treating people in ways that reflect the way “our Heavenly Father” treats them. In other words, we are to love as God loves—comprehensively and completely and inclusively and excluding *no one*.

In her book *To Love as God Loves*, Roberta Bondi makes a nice distinction between the *emotion* of love and a *disposition* to love. The emotion of love “may be spontaneous ... more or less intense, and may last only a few minutes or a reasonably long time”; it is, she says, “a kind of mood” that comes upon us, which “does not entail any action on our part to be real.”¹ The love referred to as “perfect” in the New Testament, however, is more what Bondi calls a “disposition” to love, “a deep attitude of heart ... not characterized so much by emotion—though emotion must certainly be part of it—as it is by a commitment we make that shapes our ways of seeing, understanding and acting.”²

Teachings of the earliest Christians advise us to *commit* ourselves to a way of “seeing, understanding and acting” toward others that is loving, that loves alike both friend and stranger—we are to be kind to those who are strange or

¹ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 30.

² *Ibid.*

unfamiliar to us; we are to pray for those who make our lives difficult; we are to care for those who don't care for us, our enemies. How do we do that? One way is to learn from those who do it well. Many of you have had experiences of being "strangers in a strange land," finding yourself in unfamiliar places among unfamiliar people who might be hostile to you; at such times we are most vulnerable and most in need of help from others. Here are some examples.

Dan George, editor of the *Lonely Planet Travel Guides*, was in Cairo, Egypt, when he got confused, took a wrong turn and found himself in a bad neighborhood. Sinister-looking Arabs sat in doorways and clustered in groups around stalls. As he wandered the narrow streets and alleys, he felt them eyeing his watch and his Western clothing. Aware of how serious his situation was, he didn't know what to do. Then he saw an Arab boy about six years old watching him, taking in the situation of the lost tourist. The boy approached George and without a word, took his hand, and led him back the way he had come. They walked and walked until they were out of the dangerous neighborhood. The boy released George's hand and silently disappeared back the way they had come. He hadn't asked for anything.

In 2002, when people in the U.S. were boycotting French products and eating "freedom fries" because France opposed Bush's plan to go to war in Iraq, an American woman and her husband took a long-anticipated trip to France. In

Paris, when they were getting on the train to Cannes, pickpockets stole all their money and credit cards. The couple reported the theft, and one credit card company took down their itinerary, promising to honor charges they made during the rest of their trip. The couple went on to Cannes where they stayed for several days at a small inn, but when they got ready to check out, the credit card charge was declined. The owner of the inn and his wife, who spoke little English, drove the Americans, who spoke little French, into Cannes to their own bank to see what could be done to straighten out the mess. When they got there, however, they discovered it was a bank holiday, so the bank was closed. The Americans were upset, the woman crying. The innkeeper told them not to worry; they could stay the night for free and take care of matters the next day. Back at the inn, the American woman, using the little French she knew, said, “*Merci, merci beaucoup.*” The innkeeper shook his head and led her into the dining room. He pointed to a poster on the wall—a picture of a young French girl handing flowers to an American GI. The innkeeper smiled and said, “*Merci beaucoup. Vive l’Amérique.*”

Later today, we will have a presentation on Quaker Connections in Japan, so I’d like to share an experience I had in Japan. In 1982, I was teaching Creative Writing at Fort Collins High School in Colorado. One of my students was quite talented in writing *haiku*, so we entered her in a national *haiku*-writing contest and

she won. The prize was a two-weeks'-all-expenses-paid trip for AND her English teacher to Japan!

It was a marvelous trip and I learned many things, but one encounter I will never forget. It happened after about ten days when I absolutely had my fill of sight-seeing and really needed some quiet time alone. We were in Osaka which is a huge city; we had taken the subway from our hotel to somewhere. I told the tour guide, "I don't want to go to see ____ (the next place, whatever it was). I would like to go back to the hotel."

He said, "Oh no, no, no. You can't go back alone. You won't find your way." But I assured him, "Oh yes, yes, I can. I'll be fine."

I insisted, so he finally gave me a card with the hotel's name and address, saying, "When you get back on the train, count six stops. Count *six*. Get off at the **sixth** stop."

Fine, no problem, I could do that. So I got back on the subway train and listened closely when a woman's voice came over the loudspeakers. I tried to count whenever she spoke, but then I realized I couldn't tell if she was announcing a subway stop or telling passengers the doors were closing! I tried to read the signs, but they were all in Japanese characters—I was illiterate for the first time since I was four years old! I could read nothing! Meanwhile, the subway train kept lurching and stopping, and I completely lost count of how many times we had

stopped. Finally I realized I should get off—surely we had stopped six times or more. So I got off. Alone in the Osaka subway with thousands of people rushing past, I went through a turnstile and stood considering the various tunnels going off in five different directions like the spokes of a wheel. I had no idea which way to go. I was completely lost.

An older Japanese man stopped beside me and said something I didn't understand. "I'm sorry," I said, "I don't speak Japanese."

He thought for a minute and then asked, "*Sprechen-zie deutsche?*"

"No," I replied in surprise, adding, "*Parlez-vous francais?*"

No. We stood looking at each other and then I remembered the hotel card the guide had given me. I pulled it out of my purse and showed it to the man. He smiled and nodded—I could tell he knew exactly where the hotel was. He motioned for me to follow him, and I did. We must have walked half a mile through that warren of subway tunnels until he finally led me up some stairs to the street. As we emerged from the subway entrance, he pointed across a busy street and there was my hotel! I thanked him profusely, but he wouldn't leave me yet—he escorted me across the street and to the front door of the hotel before he smiled, bowed slightly and returned to the subway. How far out of his way he went, I do not know. But I am telling you the story many years later; you can see how deeply his act of kindness affected me.

In these stories, a little Arab boy, a French innkeeper, and a Japanese man, all went well out of their way to help an American tourist, a stranger who made life difficult and who might be perceived as “an enemy.” Would I guide a Middle-Eastern person who didn’t speak English out of a bad neighborhood? Would I be kind to a French person who spoke little English and couldn’t pay his hotel bill? Would I go out of my way and spend 45 minutes to an hour walking a Japanese tourist back to her hotel? I like to think that, given the opportunity, I would do at least some such kindnesses. Most of us are kind people, willing to help if we can and have the opportunity.

Sometimes it is easier to be kind to foreigners than it is to people in our own country. Our ability to love as God loves is most challenged in loving those from our own culture or country who are different from us or who make our lives difficult in some way. For instance, if I’m conservative, can I be kind to a liberal? If I’m a liberal, can I love a conservative? Could I be kind to a criminal? How about a terrorist? And here’s a real test: Can I be kind to someone who offers views that oppose my own during Meeting for Business? Yet these are precisely the people we should be kind to, given an opportunity; precisely the people we are to love as God loves, completely and comprehensively.

I found many stories of people helped by someone who might have been hostile to them, might have been perceived as an enemy, and how the experience

changed their attitude toward the other. What happens, *inside me*, when I receive kindness from someone who may have every reason to believe I am their enemy? What happens, *inside me*, when someone I have hurt is kind to me? More significantly, when I am kind to a perceived enemy, *I* change; I lose my animosity, and my kind actions seem directed not to an “enemy” but to a “neighbor.”

I looked for stories from people who had been kind to *someone they considered an enemy*—interestingly enough, I couldn’t find any. The concept of “enemy” disappears in acts of kindness. Kindness, it seems, manifesting the “perfect love” Jesus encouraged, sees no enemies, only “neighbors.” Perhaps even Friends.

So let us be complete and comprehensive in our kindness, loving each other as the *Source* of all Love loves us, each and every one of us, with all our flaws and foibles. Let us emulate that love.