

Text: [Matthew 5:38-48 \(CEB\)](#)
Date: February 8, 2026
Title: “Praying for Our Enemies” – What Dr. King Still Asks of Us, Wk 3
Theme: Prayer FOR our enemies must genuinely be prayer FOR our enemies.

1

Today, we’re talking about praying for enemies
You heard it this morning from Jesus’ lips: “love your enemies and
 pray for those who harass you”
If you’ve spent any time in church, you’ve probably heard this
 passage a number of times
And yet, does anyone ever recall a sermon about how to do it?

I want to start with a story
Because it strikes me that not all prayers for our enemies are
 created equal
That it’s entirely possible to use prayer itself as a weapon
Have you ever experienced that?

Ironically, the first time I felt this was at a church meeting
A congregation was in a disagreement with their Superintendent
And it was significant enough that the Bishop had agreed to be
 there too – to try and smooth things over
But something happened and the bishop let us all know they
 would be late

So I suggested that maybe, while we waited, we should pray
But I wasn’t the senior person in that space, the superintendent
 was – so they took on that responsibility

And that prayer...well, it was unlike any that I’d ever heard
Absolutely dripping with annoyance and frustration
I don’t remember the exact words
But the gist of it was: “Lord, help ‘these people’ to ‘get it’”
Now, they didn’t actually say, “*get it* through their thick skulls”

But that was DEFINITELY the implication
I was shocked and surprised, and something in me wanted to
leap to that congregation's defense

So, clearly that is one way of praying FOR our enemies –
and as best I could tell, the superintendent considered this church
their enemy in that moment
Even as leaders we sometimes don't get it right

2

I'm guessing that many of us have an experience along those
lines

If you've ever been in a theological disagreement or maybe a
political disagreement with another Christian

One way folks sometimes like to leave an argument is to say,
"Well, I'll PRAY for you"

And as they walk away, I'm always like, "Wait! I wanna know the
content – what EXACTLY are you gonna pray for me?!"

Because it's not always good, is it?

Now, I won't deny there's *scriptural* precedent for praying in some
pretty vicious ways

I'd call them "knives-out" kinds of prayers – and a lot of them are
found in the psalms

Bible scholars have another name for these: the imprecatory
(impricka'-tory) psalms –
and there are a bunch of them

That word 'imprecatory' points to the function of these prayers
They act as curses upon enemies – whether personal, national, or
societal

Now, some of these curses seem pretty tame, and even perfectly
understandable, like in Psalm 35:8:

“So let them fall into their own traps. Let them stumble into their own nets. Let some unknown danger catch them.” (ERV)

When we get to Psalm 3:7, though, we might start to feel a little more uncomfortable:

“Arise, Lord! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.” (NIV)

(I think I might have seen that in needlepoint in a dentist’s office one time. Why is there always needlepoint in dentists’ offices, anyway?)

But by the time we get to the best known example of the imprecatory psalms – Psalm 137:9 –

we start feeling kind of sick

Hear this prayer against Israel’s enemy, Babylon:

“A blessing on the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock!” (CEB)

We read that and we wonder how something like this could have even made it into our holy scriptures

I remember the first time I encountered this verse, feeling absolutely shocked

But that’s one model of praying for enemies

And theologians will say that such prayers actually have a purpose

That their purpose is to help us take our desire for revenge

And our hunger to see justice done – and to put it in God’s hands

So that we’re not tempted to take it into our own hands

Which is a good thing – Psalm 137 notwithstanding

So yes, sometimes that kind of weaponized prayer AGAINST our enemies is necessary – as a release

Because we are so hurt or so angry that we can’t do anything else

But we can’t stay there

Because Jesus' command to pray FOR our enemies – really the Greek is “bless”

Comes in the context of the command to LOVE our enemies

To become like God by learning to love both the evil AND the good – just as GOD loves both the evil and the good

So, first lesson: pray against an enemy if you MUST – but only as a first step

And preferably not in the context of a church meeting

3

Dr. King believed that nonviolence wasn't just a physical matter, but also a spiritual one –

and he taught that principle to all those who would be part of the movement

In a 1957 address called “The Power of Nonviolence,” he wrote that nonviolent resistance “not only avoids external violence or external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. And so at the center of our movement stood the philosophy of love.”¹

So, according to THAT principle, calling down curses on your enemies is out of bounds

Remember, the goal is to get to a place where we replace CURSING with BLESSING

4

And here's where it begins to get difficult

Because the next step on the journey is praying for ourselves

So that OUR attitudes toward our enemies

Might reflect the love of God for them

The theology here is pretty basic
It revolves around one idea from Genesis 1:27
That our Creator has stamped – imprinted – each and every one
of us with the image of God (Genesis 1:27)

Until, and unless, we are able to see the image of God in every
single person – those we love as well as those we hate – we
will find it impossible to achieve that which Jesus asks of us
in our reading for today:

“Just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to
everyone, so you also must be complete.” (Matt 5:48, CEB)

In his 1957 sermon “Loving Your Enemies”, Dr. King said it this
way:

“[W]hen you come to the point that you look in the face of
every [person] and see deep down within [them] what
religion calls the “image of God,” you begin to love [them] in
spite of. No matter what [they] do, you see God’s image
there.... Discover the element of good in your enemy. And
as you seek to hate [them], find the center of goodness and
place your attention there and you will take a new attitude.”²

That’s why all this talk about “the sin of empathy” that’s so in
vogue right now in certain circles
strikes me as so patently unhelpful, so terribly cynical
Because empathy is literally the thing that allows us to do what
Jesus commands us to do –
to see the image of God in all people, so that we might love and
bless them like God loves and blesses them

So part of this process might require leaning into that empathy
Praying for someone’s good in very concrete ways
For their physical health
For their families

For things like wisdom and discernment and compassion
Even if we're not yet ready to pray for other kinds of blessings

What we might learn at the end of this process
Of praying for a change in our attitudes towards our enemies
And throwing in just a few basic prayers for their human well-being

Is that the problem is us
When that happens, we need to be ready to admit it
Because the end goal of faith is always transformation
Salvation, redemption – however you want to talk about it
It's always about a change

So, first, pray for enemies as enemies, if that's all you can muster
Then, pray for yourself not to see them as enemies – with a few general prayers for their well-being thrown in there too

5

Next, just like we pray for transformation in ourselves
We can pray for transformation in our enemies, too
Because that is the ultimate goal, for all of us
The restoration of right relationship with God and with our fellow human beings - reconciliation

So there's nothing wrong with praying for them to be changed
The end goal of faith is transformation, after all
Now you might ask, "Well, Joe, why didn't you just go there to start? Pray for their salvation and move on"

HERE'S why:
We can't pray for others to be changed without first praying for US to be changed

If we skip that first step of praying for ourselves, then our prayers for our enemies sound a lot like the story I told at first:
“Lord, help these dummies to get it”

Prayer is a non-violent means to see the change we want in the world

And as I move toward a conclusion

I want to return to Dr. King’s “The Power of Nonviolence”

Listen to what he wrote about the GOAL:

“The nonviolent resister does not seek to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win [their] friendship and understanding. This was always a cry that we had to set before people that our aim is not to defeat the white community, but to win the friendship of all of the persons who had perpetrated this system in the past. The...aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community.”³

6

When Jesus talks about praying for enemies and loving enemies
It's a invitation to transcend the categories
To PRAY our enemies into relationship
To LOVE our enemies into friendship

That's our aim

We might begin from a place where all we can do is pray for
God's justice, even God's punishment - upon our enemies
But we cannot stay there

We pray for the transformation of our own hearts
That we might have the capacity to love - that we might have the
capacity to bless
Those who hurt us, those who are against us
And as we pray for our own transformation, we also pray for theirs

That we might ALL be changed
To recover and reclaim that image of God that is imprinted on
each and every one of us

It sounds impossible
This idea of praying and loving enemies into friends

But that's the gospel
According to Dr. King
And according to our Lord Jesus Christ

Amen.

(in the prayer, invite people to begin where they are)

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¹ <https://laclefdeschand.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/the-power-of-non-violence-by-martin-luther-king-jr.pdf>

² <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

³ <https://laclefdeschand.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/the-power-of-non-violence-by-martin-luther-king-jr.pdf>