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Equipping God's Workers With God's Word For God's Work



LOVING ONE'S ENEMY

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When my daughter An-an was in 4th grade, she would come home sad and teary-eyed, telling me a girl in her class kept picking on her. Knowing how difficult it was for An-an to face her day-to-day encounter with that girl, yet being careful not to exaggerate the issue, I tried to tell her God's help would come as we prayed together. I also offered to talk with the girl's mother. An-an chose, instead, to resolve it by herself!

As children have their share of difficult people to live with, we adults have our share of people whom we can hardly work with. *How should we deal with these enemies who seem bent on disturbing one's peace*, they really want to know. Many of us are deeply bothered by the daily grind of difficult people around us. In one cartoon scene created by Charles Schulz, the characters Charlie Brown and Lucy were engaged in conversation. Lucy had a disgusted look on her face. Charlie was pleading with her to be tolerant with outstretched arms, saying: "Lucy, you *must* be loving. This world really needs love. You have to let yourself love to make this world a better place in which to live!" Lucy whirled around and screamed back: "Look, blockhead—the *world* I love. It's *people* I can't stand!"¹

It is never easy to deal with our enemies in a Christ-like manner, but the bib-

lical way is the proven and powerful one, as vividly shown by the Burnham couple, Martin and Gracia, American missionaries who were kidnapped by the terrorist Abu Sayyaf group. Gracia Burnham's best-selling book, *In the Presence of My Enemies*, talks of Martin's firm conviction of our Lord's love approach.² What amazing love Martin had shown to those Abu Sayyaf militants. He would even thank the guard chaining him each night as he lay down to sleep. No wonder the headline in one newspaper read: "*Mission Accomplished!*"³

Turning to the Bible for answers, we find Paul's injunction on how we should treat our enemies in Romans 12:9-21, undoubtedly reflecting the teaching of Jesus, the greatest lover of mankind. A study of this passage reveals three simple yet profound ways of dealing with one's enemies.

Letting Go: Yes, let them go!

Why harbor resentment that will rob you of your sleep and appetite? Many times the distressed party refuses to release the hurt, thinking the culprit should not be let loose swiftly nor lightly. Actually, letting go of one's enemy does more to stop bitterness from taking roots and spoiling one's health. Romans 12:16, 18 say: "*Live in harmony with another.... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,*

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Counting the cost is never the same once the situation is being experienced personally. Jesus' demand seems so great especially when He began thinning the line for people to consider His call, when many from the multitude wanted to go follow Him.

I heard God's call for me to go into fulltime ministry when I was in high school. Yet when I entered college, my perspective changed and I thought I either lost my calling or I had none to start with in the first place. I took up psychology; the passion to teach and compassion for people was very evident in my walk and talk. I joined a group of facilitators, well-trained in the area of psychotherapy and group counseling. The people we counseled were from all walks of life. My exposures created a desire in me to someday establish a therapy center integrating Christianity and spiritual help with psychotherapy.

In my last year in college, I was entrusted with the care and development of the college and high school youth in our church since we had no pastor. God has His way of working in my life and using my experiences and knowledge in psychology to prepare me for this work. I started to handle Bible studies for these groups, which involved lots of time and effort in reading and rereading Scriptures, books and cross-checking with my own walk with the Lord. What I enjoyed most in handling Bible studies was not just what I could impart to the members but what I learned from my own study of the Scriptures. The personal encounters I experienced with God made me happy and content.

How did I know He was really calling me? How can I make my calling sensible, especially to people who are not called for fulltime ministry? For most full timers, we just know it. Why? Because it is a very personal call and eventually the people around us will also confirm the

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calling in one way or another. It's more than just a feeling inside.

As for counting the cost, it was not easy for me to let go because of my passion for teaching and doing psychotherapy at the same time. And yet here I am, far from fulfilling my dream, responding to His call. Even the ability to respond to His call is by His grace. As I experience my first year in BSOP I have to do a lot of unlearning and relearning. Everyday since I came into the seminary, I have prayed for a humble and teachable heart for my Master to be able to mold me more and more into His likeness.

Did you call me, God? How can we be sure if we have been called or not? I have burned all the bridges behind; there is no turning back for me. As Jesus said in Matthew 9:62: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

I would like to share my personal testimony based on the acrostic "CALL": Confirmation, Abilities, Longings, and Life.

Confirmation. A few weeks after I got saved I felt that God was calling me into the ministry. But I told myself that I was too old for the job because I was already thirty five years old. Although I was reluctant, I started to prepare myself by taking up module classes during summer at the Baptist Theological College in Cebu City. But I was not very serious in my studies.

There were some hindrances in going into full time ministry. When I

discussed the issue with my wife, she said, "What! Are you out of your mind? Don't you realize that you have four small children, all in school?" My wife's consent and support should be the first confirmation. She finally agreed after six years of struggle.

Another hindrance was my business. God had to take my business away from me six years ago. Then there was my wife's job in the bank. She retired from her job last April, 2003. We are now living by faith, yet we survive. By removing these hindrances, God has confirmed His call to me.

Abilities. I told God I don't have what it takes to be a pastor. But when I was president of the Gideon's International, Cebu Chapter, I was forced to speak in churches and this gave me confidence. By God's grace, I have graduated with honors from several institutions in Cebu City. I cannot take the credit, because I myself do not have the abilities.

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Longing. Ever since I was a Christian, I had a deep longing to serve in the ministry. This longing led me to get involved in various organizations in order to serve Him.

Life. My wife became a Christian a year after I became a Christian because she saw the dramatic changes in my life. From a man of vices, I was a heavy drinker, a heavy smoker, womanizer, gambler, an immoral person. I became a man of righteousness (as what Paul said in Titus 3:3-7).

Paul's life and words have been my encouragement. My prayer is that God will make me useful, that I will be humble, holy, healthy, and happy as I undergo further training for His glory.

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live at peace with everyone.” All these verses are pronounced in the light of facing one’s persecutors (see verse 14) who could be identified as among both the unbelievers and the believers. The charge to live at peace with everyone is hedged with two qualifying phrases, *if it is possible* and *as far as it depends on you*. Thus, the difficulty of this precept underlies the strain of facing the hostile enemies and the struggle of human relationships in keeping accord. Paul realizes that this may not always be possible since reconciliation requires the cooperation of both parties involved.⁴ Letting go of the hurts from enemies, hard as it is, encourages one to seek harmony with others. And if, disharmony should come, let the responsibility not be laid upon the feet of the peaceful party.

Letting God: Do let God be the Judge.

God is the most suitable Judge to examine not only the wronged party but also the party being wronged, for God Himself will put things in order and He alone knows the true nature of human hearts. When we read in Romans 12:19: “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath,” closely following this charge is a quotation from Deuteronomy that says: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.” The book of Deuteronomy brings to mind God’s testing of His own people along the winding roads of the wilderness years. Here Paul quoted Deuteronomy 32:35, whose context specified that God will intervene to vindicate His people when their enemies gloat over them. God’s perfect nature of loving kindness, balanced with burning righteousness attest to His omniscient wisdom and omnipotent work.

It is indeed “a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:3). Yet David, after being conscience-stricken for sinning against God, chose to be punished by God rather than by any other means when he said: “. . . Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for His mercy is great” (II Samuel 24:14).

Letting Love: Let all actions be ruled by God’s love.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are supposed to be Christ-like, doing what Jesus would be doing and walking in His steps. Jesus states in Matthew 5:44: “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Honestly speaking, by ourselves we can never live up to our Lord’s teaching, especially with regard to loving our enemies. What a great contrast to the worldly standard of getting even and asserting one’s right! Thus, many times we Christians are so overwhelmed with living out how the Bible says we should live. If *letting go* of our grip over the enemies seems like a big sacrifice; if *letting God* handle the case is a bit forceful on our part; then, *letting love* rule our dealings with our enemies really causes us to stir within.

The main theme in this section of Paul’s writing is for believers to live out a transformed life under the Holy Spirit’s empowerment that models God’s good will before a hostile community. Thus, Paul wrote: “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” (Romans 12:20). These words echo our proper response to those who persecute us, that is, to bless, not curse, them (Romans 12:14). The imagery of pouring burning coals on our enemy’s head

is to be understood as an act of goodness, as something which “overcomes evil with good.”⁵ The connection between burning coals/fire and the purging of sin/evil is seen in the ancient Egyptian custom of a penitent demonstrating his repentance of a wrong committed and carrying a dish of burning coals on his head. Thus, it is the enemy’s benefit that is intended. As the adversary is treated with kindness, good is returned for evil, thus, overcoming evil. One commentator concludes this section of Paul’s exhortation by claiming that “the best way to get rid of an enemy is to turn him into a friend!”

Back to An-an’s story, she sort of almost did that. That school year ended with the girl announcing her leaving the school for good. An-an gave her a good-bye gift along with this note: *To my best. . . enemy!* This school year, the girl came back for her 8th grade, for good, and according to An-an, *she is much, much nicer to her and to the rest of the girls!* Proverbs 16:7 concludes it well, “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies live at peace with him.” Here is the key to turning one’s enemy into one’s friend, a proven antidote that works all the time! Try it and be transformed yourself!

¹ Schulz, C. “Peanuts,” New York: United Media.

² Burnham, G., & Merrill, D. (2003), *In the Presence of My Enemies*, Wheaton, IL: Tyndale.

³ Benigno, N. (2003, May 25), “The Burnhams: Mission accomplished,” *The Philippine Star*, pp. G-1 to G-3.

⁴ Brendan B. & Harrington D. (1996), *Romans: Sacra Pagina Series* (Vol. 6), Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.

⁵ Bruce, F. F. (1977), *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI: Tyndale.