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St. Bernard Church
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THE BENEFITS OF HAVING ENEMIES

So much of what Jesus says can be very challenging. But what He tells us to do in today's Gospel seems entirely unreasonable.

I would think that today's message ranks in the Top 5 most ignored instructions in the Bible.

So let's take a close look at what Jesus says. Let's try to understand why He says what He does and how it might actually make sense and work for us.

Maybe then we might more easily do what He tells us we must do.

Why would Jesus say, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you?"

Well, we know we're supposed to model our lives after Jesus. Did He love His enemies? Yes, He did. He loved those, He forgave those, who rejected Him, tortured Him, spit on Him, crucified Him.

But, of course, we're not Jesus. So how can we be like Him in the way He loved and treated His enemies?

We can't do this without grace, a lot of grace. So we have to pray, even beg, for the power and the strength to do what is so hard for us to do on our own.

In addition to relying on God's grace, it might also help if we try to understand some of the benefits of having enemies, of knowing people who hate us and curse us.

There's this amazing passage in the Bible, in the 2nd Book of Samuel, Chapter 16. It's about King David.

David's own son, Absalom, has rebelled against him. David has every reason to be in a bad mood.

As David is walking along with some of his soldiers, one of his enemies, a man named Shimei, sees David and starts cursing him. One of David's soldiers, very predictably, asks David for permission to lop off his head.

Now listen to what David says: "Suppose the Lord has told him to curse me... Let him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. Perhaps the Lord will look upon my affliction and make it up to me with benefits for the curses he is uttering this day."

King David believes that God has put in the mind of David's enemy that he should curse David. Therefore, David has to accept that God has some good reason for doing this.

What might God have in mind? We should try to understand this, as hard as it might be. We need to pray for some understanding of why God allowed something like this to happen, to David, or to us.

First of all, maybe David is right, that God's going to make it up to him eventually.

But maybe David's enemy, and our enemies too, those who curse us and mistreat us, aren't completely wrong. Maybe they see something in us that we don't see that needs our attention and correction.

Maybe our enemies will tell us something we need to know that our friends are too afraid to tell us.

Maybe those who curse us are completely wrong, but God wants us to hear their criticisms anyway. Maybe God wants us to be more humble. Maybe He wants us to do something with this other person that will help them in some way. We can at least pray for them. Maybe God wants us to find out why the other person sees us as an enemy, and do something about it.

Is there something about us that another person finds threatening or intimidating? Are they jealous? Does our presence remind them of something bad that happened in their life? Is there something about us that reminds another person of their own weaknesses, and that makes them angry?

In discerning God's will for each of us, there is this principle of what is called God's passive will. In other words, God's will for us is at times reflected in what He permits to happen to us.

This doesn't mean that we allow ourselves to be bullied or abused. But we do seek to know why God allows things to happen to us that can be most unpleasant. Nothing that happens in our lives, even the things we don't like, are complete accidents. God's will is mixed up in all that takes place.

You might be thinking right now of someone who is making trouble for you in your life, how you are reacting to what they say, to what they do, what all that does to you, how it makes you feel.

I'm encouraging you, and myself, to overcome the tendency to react negatively and to prayerfully consider how we might deal in a more positive, constructive way with people who are making our life difficult.

As I mentioned earlier, our so-called enemies might be God's agents in sending us a message that our friends are not going to give us. The message might be hidden, below the surface, but it still could be there somewhere.

We should be at peace when people attack us, responding with curiosity rather than anger, wondering what motivated them to say or do what they have said or done to us.

I was once in a job situation where another person in the business wanted to have a personal conversation with my boss. For some reason, my boss asked me to be present for this meeting. Well, the guy that asked for the meeting spent 30 minutes criticizing me. I thought about the passage in the Bible about King David and Shimei, and it gave me a sense of peace. I even agreed with a lot of the negative comments that were made about me.

We should pray for a deeper level of understanding of what's underneath our enemies' behavior. We should pray that God would give us the grace to truly love the person that is attacking us and to know how God wants us to respond to them.

When Jesus is truly present in our lives, when we have the active support of the Holy Spirit, we can turn moments of unpleasantness with others into moments of grace.

I'll close with this passage from Proverbs 16:7: "When the Lord is pleased with our ways, He makes even our enemies be at peace with us."