

10 Tips for Life's Greatest Challenge: Love Thy Enemy

"It is easy enough to be friendly to one's friends. But to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy is the quintessence of true religion. The other is mere business." - **Gandhi**

Whether you're Christian or not, there's something in the teachings of Jesus that is worth contemplation, for anyone who seeks to be a better person: his urging that we love our enemies.



Photo courtesy of [kalandrakas](#)

Not just "Love Thy Neighbor", which in itself can be a difficult thing.

But "Love your enemies". That's a powerful message, and it turns out, one of the greatest challenges in life.

Why is this message an important one, even if you're not a Christian? I'm not here to discuss Christian teachings, but to address universal problems found in every human being, no matter what your religion or non-religion. And this is a universal problem: the hatred we feel for other people, hatred that wells up inside of us and causes destructive actions, for people who might have harmed us in some way but in the end are fellow human beings who we must live with in a common society.

And it's an idea that was taught not only by Christ, but by Buddha, Gandhi, and many other great people and religions.

This still might sound a bit grand or preachy, so let me bring this down to an everyday level: is there anyone in your life who you hate or just can't stand? Maybe someone who just irritates you to no end, who you resent and feel bitterness towards? And if so, are you proud of that? Does it make you happy?

I'd submit that most of us have someone like that, in many cases multiple people in our lives who cause us anger or hatred or at least resentment, for something they've done in the past. I'd also submit that the anger, hatred and resentment that lives within us is destructive and counterproductive.

Let's explore these ideas a little more, if you're interested.

What Does "Love Your Enemy" Mean?

Well, it's probably pretty self-explanatory, but I thought it would be good to be clear.

"Your enemy" doesn't just mean the enemy of your state, of course. We're not talking about terrorists or the French (kidding!) ... we're talking about people you really dislike, in any way.

Who are these people? Maybe someone who has picked on you or called you names or disrespected you in some way, causing you anger ... maybe you hold a grudge against them. Maybe a family member you've had a big fight with ... maybe you've been angry at them for some time. Maybe someone who did something horrible to a loved one, from physically hurting them to hitting them with a car to scarring them from a damaging relationship. Maybe a teacher or a coworker or a boss who is mean to you. You get the picture.

And what does it mean to love these people? Obviously it's non-romantic love, but there's lots of different kinds of non-romantic love. There's the love you have for your children, your siblings, your parents, your best friends ... all of these are different in some way. Then there's the love you have for someone who just did something wonderful for you, whether that's someone you know or a complete stranger. There's the love for a child you've never met but who somehow pulls at your heartstrings. There's the love for your fellow human beings — and this is the love I mean.

Have you ever felt non-sexual, non-romantic love for another person who is not a family member or a very close friend? Maybe they did something really nice for you or another person. Maybe you are just feeling really great about humanity right now, for whatever reason. Maybe this is an incredible human being who inspires you or changes lives or volunteers to help the powerless.

To "Love Your Enemy" is to find it in your heart to put aside any wrongs, and to love them as a fellow human being. You don't have to love them like you love your parents or children or best friend. Just have loving feelings toward them ... and if possible, express it through words, or by doing something nice, or with a smile.

It's not easy, I know. Picture the person you dislike most, and see if it's easy to find that love for them.

Imagine someone who murdered someone you love. That would certainly be an "enemy". Could you find it in your heart to love that person? I know that would be the most difficult thing in my entire life ... which brings up the question: "Why should I?"

"The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread." - **Mother Teresa**

Why Should I Love My Enemy?

It might sound too corny for many of you, and if so, you might not even be reading this by now. That's OK. This idea might not be for everyone.

After all, this person, my "enemy", has done something horribly wrong to me ... why on earth would I want to love them? What do I get out of it?

This isn't an easy question, and I won't be able to explore all the possible answers — that would take a book. But let's look briefly at a few strong reasons:

- **You'll be happier.** If you have anger or resentment inside of you, even if you don't think about it all the time, there will be times when it surfaces. And that makes you unhappy. It's destructive, inwardly (it eats you up) and outwardly (you might do destructive things to others). That anger also affects others around you, such as your loved ones, who are most likely affected in some way when you are angry — even if the anger isn't directed at them. Removing this anger from yourself is a positive thing, and it will make you happier overall.
- **You could change that person's life.** Your enemy is a human being, and it's very possible that your hatred of that person is a source of grief, tension, or hatred in them. Now, that might feel good to you in a vindictive way, but if you look at it objectively, removing your feelings from the situation ... hurting another person is always a bad thing. Making them happier is a good thing. And interestingly, making someone happier, no matter who that is, can make us happier.
- **You could make a friend.** One of the most powerful effects of learning to love your enemy is that your enemy can become your friend. And while it is counterproductive to be fighting with an enemy (it hinders your progress), it is very productive to add new friends to your life — they can help you accomplish things, for example. A new friend, instead of an enemy, makes an incredible difference. And if that enemy is a family member or former friend, reuniting can be extremely powerful and important.
- **You set a better example for others.** Our actions set an example for other people in our lives. If you have

children, for example, they learn from anything you do. Teaching them to hate is not a positive example. But teaching them to overcome that anger and hate, to make up with an enemy, and to love ... there is no better example in life.

- **It's better for society.** This one seems obvious to me, but it's important. One little relationship might not seem to make a difference to society as a whole — who cares if I hate another person? But if we all hate other people, it creates a more divisive and fractured and angry society. I see the effects of this everywhere, from media and culture to politics to business to families being disrupted. And the opposite is true — if we can overcome that hatred, and learn to love our neighbor and our enemy, society is better off in so many ways.
- **It's a test of you as a person.** This might not be important to many people, but for me it is. I like to think of myself as a good person, but how good am I if I am just loving to my family and friends? That's extremely easy (usually). But a better test of your goodness is if you can overcome feelings of hatred or resentment, and turn them into feelings of love. That's a true challenge. And it's a life-long challenge.

“Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend.” - **Martin Luther King Jr.**

10 Tips For Loving Your Enemy

So let's say you think it's a worthy goal ... how do you actually go about it? I can't claim to know all the answers. I've been working on this myself, and exploring these ideas in my life ... but I have not overcome this challenge. I've made progress, and I'm proud of that ... but I have a long way to go.

However, here are some things I'm working on myself ... I hope they can be of some use to you:

1. **Stop, breathe, detach yourself.** When you think about your “enemy”, you most likely have feelings of anger or something along those lines. Instead of letting those feelings overcome you and determine your actions, stop yourself. Be aware of the feelings. Take a deep breath (or ten) and take a step back. Now see if you can detach yourself. Imagine yourself floating out of your body and looking down on the situation as an objective observer. You are no longer you. This person has no longer done anything to you or someone you love ... they've done it to someone else. Seeing the situation objectively is the first step — it's too difficult to overcome the feelings if you're in the middle of the situation.
2. **Put yourself in their shoes.** Now that you've removed yourself from the situation, and you're looking down on it from above ... try going down into the other person's body and head. Imagine yourself becoming that person. What is that person like, from inside? How did they get to be the person they are? What have they gone through? Why would they possibly have done what they did? And how did they feel about it? You'll have to use your imagination. But try to imagine this person as a real human being, not just someone who is evil or wrong. All human beings try to do good things, but they make mistakes, or they have different perspectives. Seeing the situation from the other person's perspective is very difficult, but very important.
3. **Seek to understand.** That, of course, is the objective of putting yourself in their shoes. But it's important to stress it here, because if you can understand what they did and why they did it, you can take the next steps (below). Really try to understand, even if you don't want to.
4. **Seek to accept.** Instead of fighting what has happened and who this person is, and wanting them to be different or to do things differently ... accept them for who they are. Accept what has happened as a part of life. Accept that things can't be different, because they have already happened. Accept that this person can't be different, because that's who they are. This, too, is a very difficult step, but if we cannot accept, we cannot love.
5. **Forgive, and let the past go.** Ah, maybe the most difficult step of all, but I'm sure you saw this coming. Can you truly forgive this person for what they've done, in your heart? If you've detached yourself, you've sought to understand, and you've accepted them and what has happened ... it should be easier. Try to think about this: what happened is in the past. It cannot be changed. You can either hate what's happened in the past, and change nothing but be angry ... or you can accept it and move on. Let it go. It will do nothing but eat you up. Once you've let go of the past ... let go of your feelings about what this person has done. Move on. Those feelings can do you no good.
6. **Find something to love.** If you can forgive, and release those bad feelings ... you are left with neutrality, most likely. You want to replace that with love. And how do you do this? You find something in that person to love. It could be anything ... their smile, their willingness to help someone, their generosity, their

stubbornness even. Find something admirable or lovable. There's something like that in everyone. You might have to get to know that person better, which in itself can be difficult.

7. **See them as yourself, or a loved one.** If the above step proves too difficult, it is probably because you don't know that person well enough. Instead, project yourself into them. See them as similar to yourself in some ways. Or think of them as similar in some way to a loved one — and use those similarities to find something to love.
8. **Find common ground.** We have things in common with just about everyone, if we look hard enough. That might be common interests, shared or common experiences while growing up or working, people you know or love in common, personality traits in common. This common ground will help you relate to the person better.
9. **Open your heart.** Another very difficult step. Our hearts tend to remain closed to most people, as a defensive mechanism. We are afraid of being vulnerable, of getting rejected or hurt. And yet, this closing off of our hearts is what blocks us from happiness many times, what blocks us from forming relationships, what blocks us from loving and finding love. Even if we're able to open our hearts to our loved ones but no one else ... that's limiting ourselves. This is a great challenge, and something that really can only happen with practice. Try it here, with your former enemy ... even if you can just open your heart a little, that's the only way you'll find love for the person.
10. **Reach out to them.** It's one thing to feel love for the person ... but quite another to express it in some way. There are many ways to express love, of course — some ways you might consider are telling them, saying nice things to them, having an open discussion about what's happened or your feelings, giving them a hug, doing something nice for them, smiling, making a joke.

What are your thoughts on this? Have you ever overcome this challenge? Share tips and thoughts in the comments.

“Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?” - **Abraham Lincoln**

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