

Submitting Your Hit List to Jesus

Five Ways to Pray for Your Enemies

By Lisa Bartelt

✖ My first job out of college was as a reporter for my hometown newspaper. My beat—the regular area that I was to write about—was the local school districts. I attended school board meetings and wrote feature articles. I met with superintendents, principals, and teachers to establish relationships.

For the most part, my connections with the school officials were favorable. While it wasn't my job to paint a perfect picture of the schools, I aimed to be fair in my coverage, writing about the good and the bad. On one occasion, the school superintendent was involved in some questionable dealings with the state board of education. From the newspaper's standpoint—and the state board's—he wasn't being honest about how he was running the district. At my editor's prompting, I wrote numerous stories about the superintendent's failures to accurately report to the state. Understandably, my relationship with this man was strained, at best.

I dreaded calling him to ask follow-up questions. He was intimidating, rude, and a little on the shady side. He bullied

my editor and threatened to sue the newspaper. My heart would race and my hands would shake any time I had to be in the same room with him. I tended to avoid conflict and hoped God would just make the problem go away.

A Surprising Suggestion

I had become a Christian in college, so when I returned to my hometown after graduation, I found myself lacking the community and direction I had on campus. I often called a spiritual mentor from college to talk, and one time we discussed this uncomfortable working relationship.

Her solution surprised me.

“Why don’t you pray for him?” she said.

Pray for him? I thought. I don’t even like him; why would I want to pray for him?

But her words echoed Jesus’ teachings. “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” (Matt. 5:43–44).

In the grand scheme of things, I wasn’t being persecuted, but I considered this man an enemy. Jesus’ command was clear. I needed to love that superintendent. And the only way I could do that was to pray for him.

No Easy Command

The Apostle Paul expounded on Jesus’ teaching in his letter to the Romans by saying, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14). Quoting Proverbs, he added, “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” (Rom. 12:20). Even unbelievers use the common phrase, “Kill them with kindness.”

Whatever words you choose to describe this approach, it's an action easier said than done. But it's certainly not impossible.

Here are five ways to help you pray for your enemies:

1. Make a list. Those who seek revenge often have a "hit list" of people who have wronged them at one time or another, those they wouldn't mind seeing punished in some way. The teacher in the parable of the Good Samaritan asked, "Who is my neighbor?" In the same way, we can ask, "Who is my enemy?" The goal is not to make a hit list for revenge but to specifically identify people we consider enemies. While we can pray generally for enemies we aren't aware of or with whom we'll never have contact, we'll grow the most if we're praying for personal enemies—people we see or interact with regularly.

How do you know if you regard someone as an enemy? Consider how you react when you think of the person. If you become agitated, angry, or bitter, there's a good chance you've just thought of someone who is an enemy.

2. Be honest with God. An enemy won't automatically become a friend just because you start praying for him or her. God knows how we feel. It's OK to say, "God, I don't like this person or what he's done, but I know You love him. Help me to love him too."

David's psalms are full of honest feelings about his enemies. He even wishes ill on those who pursue him. We can tell God how we feel and let Him handle it. As the Apostle Paul admonished, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).

3. Look for practical ways to meet a need. Few people are mean or ornery just for the sake of being mean. Enemies might have a past hurt, a deep insecurity, or a lingering fear they try to mask with cruelty. Ask God to help you listen to what your

enemy says and watch what he or she does.

Another adage says, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” We don’t have to become best friends, but the more we get to know our enemies, the more we’ll see of their needs.

4. Do the hard thing. Before my husband and I started dating, he was interested in a few girls in a wider circle of friends. I was already convinced of my love for him based on our friendship. It hurt me to see him paying attention to someone else. I could have gone the bitter and jealous route, but God pressed on my heart to love and bless.

I wrote an encouraging letter to one of the girls, thanking her for being among our group of friends and telling her what I appreciated about her. It was a hard letter to write, but I made myself do it. I found my feelings for her softening. I didn’t know what God was up to, but later when I entered a dating relationship with the man who would become my husband, my conscience toward the other girl was clear.

5. Look in the mirror. Recognize that it’s possible someone sees you as an enemy. Pray the words of Paul that “as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom. 12:18). Ask God’s forgiveness for any behavior in your life that would make you an enemy to someone. Then seek the person’s forgiveness if appropriate.

Change of Heart

When I started praying for the school superintendent, I didn’t know what to expect. Would he miraculously confess to his mistakes? Would my job become easier? Would he move on to another job? Would he become a Christian?

I hoped those things would happen, but in reality, my prayers lacked conviction that anything would change. Months passed. I continued to pray regularly for him. I still didn’t like the man, but I didn’t despise him, either.

One night after a school board meeting, I was leaving the parking lot in my car when he flagged me down. I cautiously lowered my window, wondering if he was going to criticize me for something I'd done wrong or if he was going to threaten me in some way.

Instead, he asked if we could schedule a meeting to talk about some ways to generate more positive stories about the school district. The man who had previously been hard to work with suddenly wanted to work together. I suspected his motives were selfish, but I left the parking lot feeling I'd gained some ground.

I thanked God for hearing my prayers. I never saw outward proof that the man had changed, but our relationship became less hostile. And God had changed my heart as I prayed.

Love your enemies.

Pray for those who persecute you.

The way of Jesus isn't the easy way, but He doesn't ask us to do something He wouldn't do Himself. On the cross, He prayed for His enemies: "Father, forgive them."

May this be our prayer as we follow His lead.

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