

Monday

Your Positive Pole

Looking at his disciples, he said...“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6:20, 27-31 NIV)

Have you ever tried to push together the negative poles of two magnets? They repel each other, and the more you try to force them together, the stronger they resist connection. Short of an overriding external force, the only way those two magnets will come together is if one of them flips its position and approaches the other with its positive pole.

Relationships can be like that. When we are in the throes of conflict, approaching each other with our negative poles only increases our resistance to each other. For example, if you and I are both angry and defensive over an incident, the more we engage each other through our negativity, the more likely we are to resist connection and reinforce the strength of our negative positions.

Jesus summed up these polarity problems in the passage quoted above. He begins his discourse by saying, in effect, “To those of you who are willing to work at resolving conflict and healing your relationships, I have the solution for you.” He then proceeds with a command that runs contrary to our natural inclinations. He says to respond with goodness and mercy to the evil that is done to us.

He lists some evils—enmity, hatred, cursing, maltreatment, injury, insult, theft—as negative poles that naturally provoke negative responses in us. Instead, he says, surprise your enemy by flipping your polarity and responding with positivity. Offer your enemy your positive pole—love, goodness, kindness, blessing, prayers on the other’s behalf, humility, vulnerability, generosity—to demonstrate that your desire to reestablish a connection is more important to you than winning an argument or holding out for a just outcome.

Heavenly Father, I confess I am all too ready to respond to an insult or offense with my negative pole. Indignation, self-righteous posturing, and resentment seem to leap into position without my conscious volition. Help me to recognize when I am approaching an adversary with my negative pole, and help me flip my position. Thank you that you always respond to my negativity with goodness and mercy that I do not deserve. May I follow your example and offer those healing graces to those who oppose and mistreat me. Amen.

Dig Deeper: Romans 7:23-25; 12:21

Reflect: What kind of mistreatment is most likely to provoke a negative response from me? If I could reverse my polarity, what might my positive response look like?

Thought for Today: Surprise your enemy with loving kindness.



Tuesday

Wounded Wounders

This is what the LORD says: Be fair-minded and just. Do what is right! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors. Quit your evil deeds! Do not mistreat foreigners, orphans, and widows. Stop murdering the innocent! (Jeremiah 22:3 NLT)

Through his prophet Jeremiah, God describes his social policy for right living among his people. The theme is familiar and repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments: Be just, righteous, and merciful. Be ready to help those who need your help and never be the one to add to another's misery.

If you are having difficulty with the idea of forgiving someone who has hurt you, you might try recasting your situation in the terms God describes. Consider how your offender might be viewed as one who has been "robbed" or "oppressed," and you as the one who can help him or her.

Different Bible translations offer alternative descriptions for the one who has been "robbed," such as the spoiled, the wronged, the victim of exploiters, the cheated, and the plundered. Likewise, the "oppressor" can be translated as the one who robs, attacks, exploits, cheats, extorts, or makes false accusations.

Does this oppressor sound familiar?

The apostle Peter describes this oppressor as "your enemy the devil" who "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8 NLT). Scripture depicts this enemy elsewhere as the accuser, lying spirit, tempter, prince of demons, and spirit that works in the children of disobedience. Every person born on this earth is prey to this cunning and merciless adversary. No one escapes the damage that evil perpetrates. We all bear scars from our own sin as well as from the hurtful acts of others, sometimes breaking or crippling us in ways that make healthy relationships difficult or impossible.

We can't know what makes people act the way they do. Unlike God, we can't see into their hearts to determine motives; we don't know all the life experiences that have shaped their character and taught them how to deal with others. Our idea of justice may shift when we consider how those who offend us may themselves have been robbed, cheated, exploited, or "spoiled." How might their concept of love or goodness have been twisted, or their dignity or innocence taken from them? How might their hope have been stolen and replaced with fear, hatred, or desperation?

When facing that person we cannot forgive, we can choose whether to respond as just one more oppressor or to allow compassion to temper us. With God's help, we might offer mercy instead and the hope of Christ, who bears the only Name in the universe that can take on the evil of this world and win.

Heavenly Father, it's difficult for me to feel compassion and mercy toward someone who has been cruel. However, because you require justice and righteousness from me, I ask for grace and courage to obey. Help me to recast people who wound and offend me so that I can see them as prey to the evil

influences of a world under Satan's rule. Keep me from adding to their misery with punishing or vengeful acts of my own. Instead, let me be a help and a light for the sake of your kingdom. Amen

Dig Deeper: Isaiah 58:6-9; Zechariah 7:8-9; James 2:12-13

Reflect: In what way has the evil of this world stolen something from me? How has this loss affected me?

Thought for Today: God calls us to help and protect the very people who injure us.



Wednesday

Am I Sweet?

Taste and see that the LORD is good. (Psalm 34:8 NIV)

What tastes better than a basket of sweet summer strawberries or cherries picked right off the tree? The fragrance of a sun-warmed peach can make our mouths water; the sweetness of a plump, juicy grape invites us to sample another, and another.

It seems no coincidence that God chose *fruit* as a metaphor for the work of the Holy Spirit in us. When I bring love and goodness and kindness and gentleness into my relationships, others taste the sweetness of God. Our Father gives us this good fruit for the benefit and nourishment of those around us. Indeed, as priests of our King, we have the honor and responsibility to bring the goodness of God's kingdom into every circumstance and relationship we encounter.

The next time you are tempted to respond to an offense with harsh words or hurtful retaliation, ask yourself, *what taste of God and his kingdom will my actions bring to this person—sweet or bitter?*

Heavenly Father, thank you for your sweet goodness. Help me to remember that as a royal priest and a member of your family, I am entrusted with helping others learn more about you. Please take the bitterness out of my "fruit" and make my actions sweet and wholesome for the nourishment of others, even my adversaries. Amen

Dig Deeper: Song of Songs 2:3; Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Peter 2:9

Reflect: When has being forgiven brought sweetness into my life?

Thought for Today: The sweetness of forgiveness gives people a taste of God's goodness.



Thursday

Battle of the Grudge

The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And

the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. (Galatians 5:17 NLT)

Our sinful nature is always willing to do battle over injuries and insults we suffer in relationships. Selfish motives compel us to hurt back, punish, or escalate conflict rather than to let some wrongdoer off the hook. Far from wanting to appear weak, we may even argue our moral obligation to teach the wrongdoer a lesson for the good of humanity.

Paul calls this kind of thinking slavery to our sin nature. The Spirit, he claims, has come to set us free, not so we can indulge our natural inclinations but so we can love and serve God by loving and serving one another.

Faith teaches us that we have nothing to fear from our neighbors. We can afford to be generous and forgiving because our souls are safe and our value is guaranteed through the saving grace of Christ's death for us on the cross. What truly threatens us is the evil that tempts us away from God and leads us into quarrels and jealousy and vengeful behavior.

Although God desires that we forgive one another, our pain over an injury may be so great that forgiving seems utterly impossible. If that's true for you, take heart and don't try to force the issue.

Instead, offer a simple prayer: "Father, give me faith to love you more."

Just that. Pray it several times a day. Pray it every day. If you do, two things will happen:

- God will honor your prayer and give you what you ask. God will fill you with the reassurance of his Spirit because that's what he desires and has promised to do.
- God's Spirit will form in you desires that your sinful nature will resist but cannot defeat—desires to love and be merciful and in every way manifest your Father's loving nature in your life and your relationships.

Heavenly Father, give me faith to love you more. Amen

Dig Deeper: Ephesians 2:8-10; Galatians 5:13-15

Reflect: How can love for God help me let go of a grudge?

Thought for Today: We can afford to forgive because our souls are safe and our worth is secure.



Friday

Defeating Evil

Every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. (1 John 5:4-5 NLT)

When trouble comes at us through a relationship, it helps to remember that we are part of an ongoing spiritual battle. Satan is at war with God, and part of his strategy to defeat God is to hurt God's children.

The pain we suffer in human conflict may drive us away from God, or it can lead us closer if we ask, *what is the evil in this situation that I need God to help me overcome?*

- Am I being threatened with harm?
- Do I feel tempted to sin?
- Is my faith as a follower of Christ being shaken?
- Am I falling prey to self-doubt or to guilt and remorse over things I have done?
- Are my flaws and fears being exploited?

We cannot escape this great spiritual battle, but our faith and trust in God can help us deal with it. The Spirit can teach us how to identify and oppose the evil in a conflict without our hating and opposing the other person, whom God dearly loves and for whom Jesus died.

Our Savior assures us that he has overcome every evil that we face in this world. Moreover, he promises that we, too, can defeat evil if we put our hope and trust in him.

Heavenly Father, I have been shocked and hurt by the evil that has come at me through my relationships. Give me faith to stand strong in your work of salvation on the cross, where you defeated all that assaults me now. I ask for wisdom to see my true adversary in Satan and not in other humans who, like me, are susceptible to being used for evil purposes. Thank you that evil will not have the last word in my life as I daily choose to follow you. Amen

Dig Deeper: John 16:33; 1 John 4:4

Reflect: What weakness in me is Satan most likely to exploit through human conflict?

Thought for Today: When we belong to Christ, evil will never have the last word.



Saturday/Sunday

Weekend Review

Settle in: I quiet myself and acknowledge God's presence. I offer God my time and attention. I ask the Spirit to help me review my week with clarity and understanding.

Review with gratitude: I allow memories of the week to flow through me like a slow river. I notice special moments and gifts, large and small, for which I am thankful. I take some time to acknowledge these blessings before God and express my gratitude.

Celebrate: I recall what went well for me this week.

- When did I experience life-giving feelings, such as joy, peace, love, generosity, or being on a right path?
- When did I feel God's nearness?
- How did I practice new insights from my forgiveness work this week?
- In what ways did God counsel and help me this week?

Confront: I recall what did not go well for me this week.

- When did I experience life-draining feelings, such as anger, anxiety, envy, sadness, fear, rebelliousness, or being on a wrong path?
- When did God seem most distant?
- What forgiveness practices did I find difficult or impossible?
- In what ways did I resist God's counsel and help this week?

Talk it over: I talk with God about what I've discovered.

- I praise and thank God for the work of his Spirit in my life this week.
- I acknowledge areas of my life where I am resistant to God's call and counsel.
- I ask God for the grace I need to continue this journey of forgiving and practicing God's ways in my relationships.

Close with prayer: I pray along with this prayer of Origen (c. 185-254):

Jesus, my feet are dirty. Come even as a slave to me, pour water into your bowl, come and wash my feet. In asking such a thing I know I am overbold, but I dread what was threatened when you said to me, "If I do not wash your feet I have no fellowship with you." Wash my feet then, because I long for your companionship. Amen