

Exactly four weeks ago, Nigerian Christians gathered to worship Jesus in their rural church in the village of Waga Chakawa, as they had done many times before. Lying near the border to Cameroon, it's located in the northeastern state of Adamawa, nicknamed "The Land of Beauty." On Sunday, January 26, the village church is busy. But suddenly the peaceful church has some new visitors. The faint sound of people approaching quickly rises as they storm the church. Before the service can get done, the doors are locked, with everyone inside. Guns are raised. Militants open fire and set off bombs. Those who try to escape have their throats slit. After a four hour long siege, houses are burned and Christians taken hostage. Matthew, one worshipper, described it this way, "*The gunmen used explosive devices to attack us as the worship service was on, and many of our Christian brethren lost their lives. ... We were all scattered by the attackers, and as we escaped those that were not able to escape were taken hostage, especially, women, children, and the elderly.*" On Monday, the day following the carnage, the congregation has to bury at least twenty-two of its own. The Islamic extremists suspected of this ruthless attack come from Boko Haram, rated the second most dangerous terrorist group in the world by the State Department. Its name means "Western education is forbidden." Seeking to set up sharia law in Nigeria's north, a country split evenly between Christians and Muslims, they continue their bloody campaign against a governmental crackdown and state of emergency with many such attacks the past five years.

What's your gut reaction when you hear reports like this of Christians being persecuted and killed for the crime of going to church, just like you're doing now? Outrage? Disgust? Anger? Hatred? Vengeance? Our love and compassion easily goes out to those villagers and Christians, but certainly not to Boko Haram. We easily pray for those Christians suffering, but not for those militants who cause that persecution and suffering. How can Jesus, then, possibly tell us to love our enemies? Pray for those who persecute us? Jesus gives us radical new views of what love does. Here the Sermon on the Mount impresses on us, "**Jesus Has a Radical Definition of Love ... for us and for himself.**"

Jesus continues this section of the Sermon on the Mount with two passages from the Old Testament that had been oversimplified and abused over time. Both of them came from the Law of Moses, given to God's people to show them how to live as the nation of Israel. The "eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth" passages were originally meant to protect the victim from personal vengeance or outlandish punishment by the accuser. The punishment should fit the crime, not the exaggerated claims by false witnesses. But these passages, by Jesus' time, had been abused by some of the Pharisees, turned into a green light to take things into your own hands and execute extreme vengeance. So too, even in the Old Testament, God's intention was that his people love their neighbor, or anyone they have contact with. But some of those same Pharisees added in the second phrase, "But hate your enemy," something God never intended. They thought God's command to love one of his own people implied hating those who are not.

Jesus, though, gives a radical definition of love. He returns these passages to their original intent. He encourages them toward counter-intuitive love. Love which turns the other cheek when someone strikes or punches you. Love which gives even more to those who are suing you. Love which goes the extra mile for an evil person compelling you into service. Love which always prays for those who consistently persecute you. Why? What could possibly motivate this? "***But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that***

you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Jesus points his disciples to God the Father. He shows no difference in showering his physical blessings on the righteous and the unrighteous. He shows no difference between those who return his favor and those who don’t. He sends his protection and blessing in nature to the whole world. Jesus uses an illustration from the most hated and un-Christian people of his day to show how his definition of love is so radical. Even the tax collectors, those servants of the hated Romans, love those who love them back. Even the Gentiles, the heathen, those who aren’t even God’s select people welcome their own. Here’s the point. Christ exposes the shallowness of self-centered righteousness. Everyone can love selfishly expecting to get something back. That doesn’t show anything. Jesus’ definition of love is different. He loves those who don’t love him back. His law is so all-encompassing, never pick and choose what parts I like and what parts I don’t. Never buffet-style of choosing only what works for me. The basis and standard of our actions is the complete perfection of our heavenly Father. ***“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”***

In the 1990s I had the privilege of being introduced to our American legal system through shows like Judge Judy. I’m not quite sure if it provided more entertainment or education as to how the justice system should operate. I am positive, though, that I never heard a defendant plead to Judge Judy with all seriousness, “They’re suing me for \$5000, why stop there? They’re being far too generous and considerate! Here’s \$10,000!” That is just as preposterous to any of us as it would be on a TV show like Judge Judy. Jesus’ examples of going the extra mile in love and service are just as counterintuitive in our American culture which prizes individualism as in the Pharisaical culture which added to God’s law. Our court system can bring out the most selfish side of people, especially with our sue-happy tendency in America, almost never the most gracious side.

Jesus has a radical definition of love for us. His definition requires unheard-of standards. The perfect expectations of our heavenly Father are so uncomfortable they can easily water down into “the comfortable law of personal reward” or “the law of the pretty good.” I don’t want to face up to my sins in the presence of God. I put a Band-Aid on the cancer of my sins. I rearrange the chairs on the deck of the Titanic to make my conscience feel better. “God, don’t you expressly tell me to love ‘especially those who belong to the family of believers.’ I do that really well. Doesn’t that count for anything? But God, look at the good I do for your church! Look at my prayers for the persecuted Christians around the world! Look at how I stand up against your enemies as I show them they’re wrong and how we’re right! Look God, am I not doing you a service by giving your enemies the punishment they deserve from you?” Suddenly we have selfishly authored God’s law for him. God should let the good I do outweigh the bad. God should grade on a curve, with my loving acts toward fellow Christians receiving the most weight. His law should primarily serve me, maybe my neighbor second, but certainly not my enemy who scoffs at and murders fellow Christians. But Jesus the teacher doesn’t score points according to the students’ standard. He has his own rubric for the test. He is perfect and expects perfect fulfillment. By turning “the law according to God” into “the law according to me,” I have made myself into a little god.

Why does God hold us to ridiculously high standards? Unheard-of standards? Unfathomable standards? It’s because he holds himself to those same standards. Jesus has a radical definition of love not only for us, but for himself. God the Father does not bring out his checklist every morning and ask, “Ok, who’s served me last night? I’ll only give sunlight and rain to them.” He gives his providence and gracious rule over the earth to both Christians and

non-Christians every day. Look how far Jesus went to love his enemies. He never told his heavenly Father, "Look only at what I do for your people!" He said, "Look at what I do for my enemies! Give your love to them. Give them my forgiveness." He never resisted the evil men who marched up to Gethsemane to interrupt his prayer service with his disciples and kill him. When they struck him in the face and mocked him, "Tell us who hit you!" he let them do it again to his other cheek. When the Roman soldiers forced him to take the first steps to Calvary, he went the extra mile. When they wanted to take away his tunic and cloak, he gave them his dignity as well. When the other two criminals next to him scorned and cursed their enemies, he asked again and again for forgiveness for them. Jesus is the epitome of love not just for your friends but for us his enemies. It's counterintuitive for us, but it wasn't for Jesus. What he requires from us, he gives. He gives us his perfect love for his enemies. He gives us his perfect forgiveness for those we want to scorn. He gives us his A+s for our Fs on God's perfection test. He gives us his unlimited forgiveness for our limited love.

Look to the love of Jesus and his definition of love for himself. Let that change your natural gut reaction of holy revenge into selfless love. An animal will snarl and show its teeth when provoked or threatened. That's how we would react without Jesus' definition of love. Not anymore. That vengeance is for God to deal with. When you say your bedtime prayers, don't leave out Boko Haram. Yes, pray for extremists who blow up Christian churches. Your heart is filled with Christ's love for his enemies who wanted to kill him. When you love fellow Christians, don't forget to love atheists. Yes, love Richard Dawkins and others who lambast the foolishness of Christianity. Your heart is filled with Christ's love for his enemies who wanted to ridicule him.

Your heart is filled with Christ's unselfish love which put himself last, which let his enemies walk all over him. Love your neighbor just as equally as you love yourself. Love your atheist enemy at work who spurns Christianity. Welcome like a true hospitable host those who judge you for your faith. Embrace those times of difficulty or persecution. Those are the greatest times when you can show Jesus. Those are the greatest times to more fully reflect God's unselfish love in our lives.

The world has many definition of love. Here Jesus gives his definition of love and holds himself to it. He changes our outlook. He transforms our attitude toward others. He replaces our vengeful anger with selfless love. Love your enemies. Why? God loves them too. Amen.