

It Is Written

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What Sets Christians Apart From The World?

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We live in mean, hateful times. It seems that with many people kindness, politeness, and mercy are considered qualities of a previous generation. This can easily be seen in the riots that plague many of our large cities, but it's also observed by driving down any busy road. Angry words are shouted and obscene gestures are made, rather than courtesy shown.

Many pagan cultures, including the Roman Empire, also considered kindness and mercy as "weaknesses." Consider the following description of Roman culture: "*Indeed, as E. A. Judge has noted in detail, classical philosophers regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions—defects of character to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it was contrary to justice. Therefore 'mercy indeed is not governed by reason at all,' and humans must learn 'to curb the impulse'; 'the cry of the undeserving for mercy' must go 'unanswered.'* Judge continued: '*Pity was a defect of character unworthy of the wise and excusable only in those who have not yet grown up. It was an impulsive response based on ignorance. Plato had removed the problem of beggars from his ideal state by dumping them over its borders.*" (Stark, Rodney; [The Rise Of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History](#); Frontline, PBS.org). It is within this historic context that Christians stood out as different. Perhaps this helps to explain why "not many mighty, not many noble, are called" (c.f. 1 Cor. 1:26-31), since these qualities were for "unworthy, undeserving weaklings." A foundational teaching of the gospel is that since all men have sinned, all need mercy and grace from God.

All of this is the inevitable outcome of rejecting God. "***And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful***" (Rom. 1:28-31). Sound familiar?

The challenge for Christians is to not get caught up in the mean-spirited, hatefulness of our day. Christians need to be different, and other should see and recognize that difference. Here are some ways we should stand apart from the world:

1) Our Love For One Another. Jesus said, "***A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another***" (Jn. 13:34-35). We might wonder, "How is this a 'new commandment?' Didn't the Old Law speak of loving 'your neighbor as yourself' (Lev. 19:18)?" The "newness" of it is not in the instruction, but in the depth of our love. Jesus clarifies by saying, "as I have loved you." His love was sacrificial and completely selfless, Rom. 15:1-3. Our love for one another should be the same. "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (Jn. 15:13).

This kind of love is not just sentimentality or mere emotion, it has a practical side. We are to give preference to one another (Rom. 12:10) and consider others as better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). When

one member suffers or is honored, we all feel the same (1 Cor. 12:26). This is a love that the world does not have and cannot understand. It is founded on God's sacrificial love for us.

2) Loving Our Enemies. This is perhaps the most difficult, unnatural things God has called us to do. Often, the natural reaction is to return evil for evil. But, again, Jesus calls us to be different: **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"** (Matt. 5:43-45). The concept is easy enough to understand, the doing of it is much more difficult.

Loving our enemies becomes easier when we remember that God loved us when we were His enemies. **"For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. 10 For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life"** (Rom. 5:6-10). By remembering our need for mercy, we can more easily demonstrate that same mercy toward others. None of us are worthy or deserving of God's forgiveness on our own. Our justification and reconciliation are through our obedience to Christ.

To properly love the souls of men, we need to understand humanity's situation (which was also ours at one time, Eph. 2:1-3). Paul describes it this way, **"in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will"** (2 Tim. 2:25-26). We can better look on sinful men with pity and mercy when we realize they have been trapped by the devil.

3) Returning Kindness In The Face Of Evil. Here is another extremely difficult command. And, once again, the easy thing is to return aggression for aggression. Our animal desires are to be set aside and replaced with the character of Jesus. **"For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth'; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously"** (1 Pet. 2:21-23). Anyone who thinks that Christians are cowards or wimps truly does not understand what God has called us to do! No coward will inherit eternal life, Rev. 21:8. Evil will never be conquered by more evil but it can be overcome with good (Rom. 12:21).

4) A Hope That The World Doesn't Have. Most men hope for either the temporary things of the world (material things, pleasures, or power), or they have a false hope based on a corrupt religion (Matt. 7:21-23). Our hope is for something far better, **"in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began"** (Tit. 1:2). Ultimately, it is this hope that motivates us to endure the trials of life and obey the difficult commands already discussed.

The Christian's hope is observable, others can see it in our lives. **"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear"** (1 Pet. 3:15). When a loved one dies, if they have been faithful to God, we know that we will see them again and can find comfort in that (1 Thess. 4:13-18). If we are persecuted, we can endure being focused on heaven (Matt. 5:11-12). We can endure the trials of life with joy knowing that they are preparing us for the reward (Jas. 1:2-4; 2 Pet. 1:5-11). To the world, this reaction to difficulties makes us stand out as "odd." Our ability to be content, even joyful, when tragedy strikes shows that we have something they lack. And that may cause others to ask about our hope.

Our culture may, in time, become like Rome where kindness, love, and mercy are viewed as weaknesses. Thankfully, we're not there yet! The darker the world becomes, the brighter our lights must shine (Matt. 5:14-16).