

LOVING THE UNLOVABLE



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LOVING THE UNLOVABLE

Sometimes people can be so wonderful and kind: loving, caring, empathic, compassionate, and generous. Sadly, though, the darker side of human nature is also a reality. People can be mean-spirited, selfish, dismissive, dishonest, insulting, slanderous, abusive, manipulative, racist, prejudiced, and just outright hateful. When we personally experience or witness someone displaying this kind of behavior, we can become so angry at the insensitivity of others that we find ourselves having feelings of hatred toward them. We can come to view them as being unlovable people. It can even seem to us that they are living their lives in opposition to what is good and Godly. In the Old Testament, King David expressed his anger at such people, saying: *“How I hate those who hate thee, oh Lord, I hate them with perfect hatred.”* (Psalm 139:21)

If you have ever been deeply hurt or offended by the actions of another, this pamphlet is for you. This brief guide is written to offer a Christian perspective on how we are to deal with those we see as unlovable.

The Scriptures and writings of the Church Fathers, along with the Church liturgies, teach how

to view the ‘unlovable’ in the light of Christ’s teachings. By understanding and adopting the Church’s perspective, the pain you feel from being mistreated can be lifted. In place of the pain, the grace of God can flood into your heart, providing a healing spiritual balm to restore your soul. You can even become, by the grace of God, filled with a sense of Divine compassion. Learning the Christian way of dealing with people who seem unlovable is a pathway for healing as well as for personal spiritual growth. Loving, as the Church teaches us to love, can even lead to reconciliation with our enemies.

In addressing the topic of ‘loving the unlovable’, two coexisting spiritual realities need to be affirmed. The first one is this: even though people may seem incredibly difficult to love, the Church teaches that God loves everyone and calls us to do the same. After all, Jesus said, *“For God so loved the world, He gave his Only-Begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* (John 3:16). This Scripture is clearly understood by the Church to be declaring that God loves everyone in the world. Therefore, no one is unlovable. When we read the term ‘unlovable’, we are to think, ‘people acting in unloving ways.’

The second, co-existing reality is this: loving someone does not mean condoning their sin. St. Clement of Alexandria explains this dynamic: *Loving one’s enemies does not mean loving wickedness, ungodliness, adultery, or theft. Rather, it*

means loving the thief, the ungodly person, and the adulterer. Not as far as he sins (in respect of his actions by which he stains the name of man), but as he is a man and is the work of God. Clement of Alexandria (c. 195, E), 2.426, p. 409, a Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs.

Loving one's enemies is an essential component of the Christian faith. Scripture commands us to love our enemies, bearing in mind that they are not always responsible for the evil they are doing. Those who are truly living in opposition to God are seen by the Church as being under the influence of evil forces. In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul wrote: *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."* (Ephesians 6:12).

St. Paul also wrote about how people can live as captives of the devil: *Opponents must be gently instructed in the hope that God will grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will."* (2 Timothy 2:24).

This pamphlet will review three stories that speak of 'loving the unlovable'. The first is one from my own childhood, the second from the lives of St. Gregory and King Drtad, and the third from the life of Joseph the Patriarch.

LOVING THE UNLOVABLE

When I was a child, I hated some of my school classmates. I was born cross-eyed. About two to four percent of children are born with this condition. For some, it corrects itself naturally as the child ages. For others, as was the case with me, it needed surgical correction. My first surgery was at eight years of age, and it was unsuccessful. My second surgery was at the age of thirteen, and that one worked. So until I was thirteen, I was cross-eyed.

Some children in my school liked to make fun of their classmates who looked different. So, during my childhood, I was subject to a good deal of teasing, emotional abuse, and occasionally physical abuse by a few of my peers. For a time, I hated them. To me, they were unlovable.

My parents always said to dismiss the insults. They taught me to simply say, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me." Speaking those words to my abusers had no effect on them, other than to make them try worse insults. While most of my peers did not take part in this mistreatment, a small, vocal group did. They teased me and any other child who was 'different' in the class. Emotional abuse was their immoral hobby. They did not understand the cruelty in their actions.

My parents taught me that there was nothing wrong with me for being cross-eyed; there was something wrong with them. They even told

me, 'You should feel sorry for them for being so mean.' Gradually, I did begin to feel sorrow for them. I noticed how they pressured one another to be unkind, and how if one of them wanted to stop being insulting, they themselves would become an object of ridicule by the same group. The unspoken rule that governed their actions was 'tease or be teased.' They were living in fear of one another.

Throughout this period of my childhood, I attended Sunday School regularly. All the Sunday School students were encouraged to memorize Bible passages. Learning certain passages helped me deal with my feelings of anger toward them. There were a number of passages, in particular, that helped me:

1) Jesus said, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" (Matthew 5:44).

I found that when I tried to feel love for 'my enemies,' It gradually became clear that the Word of God was directing me to delineate *them* from their *actions*. Jesus' words were teaching me to try to puzzle out *how* to love them. Gradually, I learned it is possible and proper to love someone without loving everything they do or say. After all, Scripture says that God created man in His image and likeness. Every human being serves as a reminder of God's presence in that they bear the image of God, and we are always to rejoice in the Lord's presence.

2) *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23) and *“The wages of sin is death. but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 6:23).

These verses reminded me that as bad as I considered others' sins to be, I too am a sinner, and my sins are serious enough to warrant a death sentence, yet God offered me, as well as them, forgiveness and eternal life.

3) *“While we were still sinners, Jesus died for us.”* (Romans 5:8).

This passage reminded me that God loves me despite my sin and that He wants me to love others despite their sins too.

4) *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”* (Matthew 18:15).

Jesus' teachings to 'pull people aside personally to confront them with their sin,' was helpful to me. As I grew in my knowledge of Scripture, I gradually pulled my tormentors aside and spoke with them one-on-one. Eventually, they all stopped.

In my childhood, I was blessed to be taught the Word of God, which helped me learn how to love those who would be considered to be 'unlovable.'

ST. GREGORY AND KING DRTAD

One of the most powerful examples of loving the unlovable comes to us from the story of the conversion of Armenia to Christianity. Today, we celebrate both St. Gregory and King Drtad as saints in the Armenian Church. Drtad, however, was not a saint early in his life. In fact, he was a persecutor of Christians, ordering their torture and execution.

In recalling St. Gregory's treatment of the pagan King Drtad, we read a powerful example of how to love the 'unlovable'.

St. Gregory was a loyal servant to King Drtad in his royal court. During the first year of his reign in Armenia, King Drtad visited a town where there was a temple to the Goddess Anahit. His men made sacrifices. Gregory was ordered to venerate her statue as well. Gregory refused.

King Drtad said, "You have served me well these many years. Why, in this one matter, do you refuse my will?" Gregory responded, "You speak truly. I have served you as God commands us to serve our earthly lords. But He alone is the creator of angels and men, of heaven and earth. We can worship only Him." King Drtad was angered and said, "By saying this, you render all your service to me completely worthless. I shall punish rather than reward you, as I planned. It will be prison and bondage for you unless you honor the goddess Anahit."

Gregory continued to state that he would

not worship a lifeless object of stone. Instead, St. Gregory proclaimed they must worship Jesus Christ, “the one who lives and gives life.” As a result, King Drtad had St. Gregory imprisoned overnight. The next day, when brought before the king, St. Gregory evangelized, telling the king about Jesus.

St. Gregory again preached the Gospel to King Drtad, but King Drtad would not even consider the preaching of St. Gregory. St. Gregory told the king he was being stubborn like a mule.

King Drtad, resenting the analogy to being mulish, decided to humiliate St. Gregory by treating him like a mule. The historian Agathangelos recounts St. Gregory’s tortures:

‘The king ordered Gregory’s hands to be bound and for him a muzzle to be placed over his mouth with a heavy block of salt hung on his back. Then they raised him up to the highest part of the palace wall for all to see. St. Gregory, turned into an object of derision, was kept hanging there for a full week.’

St. Gregory again preached the Gospel and lovingly rebuked the king for his stubbornness to consider the true God. St. Gregory’s response reminds us that part of loving our abusers is confronting them with the uncomfortable truth of the mistakes they are making. Gregory is teaching us by his actions to actively seek to persuade, admonish, and challenge those who are close-minded about God.

‘Drtad then ordered St. Gregory to be hung

upside down from one foot; and while suspended, they should burn dung under him, and he should be beaten with green rods. Ten men tortured Gregory according to the order of the king for seven days, beating Gregory, making his skin welt up and breaking many of his bones.'

While he was being beaten, St. Gregory prayed for his torturers because he loved them and sought their repentance. Even when he thought he was being beaten to the brink of death, he never gave up hope in them. In his hopefulness for their conversion, we see the manifestation of what St. Paul spoke of when he wrote, "*Love always hopes.*" (1 Corinthians 13:7).

So then, St. Gregory teaches us to continue to hope that God will change the hearts of those who 'do not yet know His love', who are, at times, also referred to as 'the 'unlovable.'

It is hard to listen to these tortures, but by recounting them, we see the grace of God present. Despite the abhorrent abuse St. Gregory suffered at the hands of King Drtad, he still loved him and prayed for his conversion.

King Drtad then ordered one torture after another:

- Wooden blocks were affixed to St. Gregory's feet and shins and tightened until blood ran down to the tips of his toes.
- He was beaten on the head.
- His head was placed in a vice, with a reed

in his nose. Salt, borax, and vinegar were poured into his nose.

- His head was placed in a large sack, half filled with cinders, for six days.
- His sides were torn with iron scrapers, peeling the skin off his body.
- Iron thistles were placed on the ground. St. Gregory was stripped naked and rolled on them until “every part of his body was torn, leaving no place intact.”
- He was suspended, his knees were struck until his kneecaps were broken, and he was left there for three days.
- He was tied down and molten lead was poured all over his body.

Finally, the king ordered that St. Gregory be bound hand, foot, and neck and thrown down a deep well, known as Khorveerab. He was to be left there to suffer in excruciating pain and to die. Instead of being filled with resentment, anger, and hopelessness, while in the well, St. Gregory continued to pray for the conversion of King Drtad and of the land of Armenia.

WHILE GREGORY WAS IN THE PIT

Emperor Diocletian of Rome sought a wife. He wanted to marry the most beautiful woman in the land. He had his artisans go throughout the kingdom and paint portraits of the most beautiful women. When the paintings were brought back to Emperor Diocletian, he decided he wanted to marry a woman named Hripsimeh, who, as it turns out, was a nun. Hripsimeh was part of a group of thirty-seven nuns, led by the abbess Gayane. When the nuns heard Diocletian wanted to marry the celibate Christian nun Hripsimeh, they thought it was best to flee far from Rome. They ended up fleeing to Armenia.

Emperor Diocletian sent a copy of the painting of Hripsimeh to the area kings, one of whom was King Drtad. Upon seeing her picture, he had his army search for her in his lands. When they found her, King Drtad sent an entourage with gifts to propose to her and make her his queen. Hripsimeh, the celibate Christian nun, refused the proposal of the already married, pagan King Drtad.

King Drtad then had Hripsimeh brought to his bedroom, where he tried to force himself on her. By the power of God, she was able to resist his assault. In response, the king soon ordered Hripsimeh, Gayaneh, and all the nuns killed in horrible ways, including their being disemboweled and dismembered alive.

Soon after this, the King lost his mind. (One

can easily argue he already had). Drtad was unable to speak and unable to govern his kingdom.

THE CURE FOR DRTAD

The king's sister, Khosroveetoukht, had a recurring vision that the only person who could cure the king was Gregory.

They threw down a rope into the well in which St. Gregory was imprisoned for 13 years. St. Gregory came out and he was brought towards the king. Upon seeing them, St. Gregory knelt in prayer. The king miraculously regained the ability to speak, fell at his feet, and said, "We beg you, forgive us the crime that we have committed against you."

Instead of being filled with anger or spite, St. Gregory's heart was full of compassion for this former abuser. St. Gregory never lost faith that God could change the heart of King Drtad.

Gregory then partially cured the king. He began to instruct the king and his court in Christian Doctrine. Soon, the king and the royal court embraced the message of the Gospel. King Drtad was fully healed, and the royal court was baptized. Then King Drtad, once the persecutor of Christians, declared Christianity to be the religion of Armenia in the year 301. The king had become, by the grace of God, a strong advocate for Christianity in Armenia, ordering the destruction of all pagan altars.

In St. Gregory's love for King Drtad, we see many biblical teachings at work:

HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY HATRED

Unhealthy hatred is hatred of people. The Bible teaches that hating one's brother is sinful: *"Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness."* (1 John 2:9) *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."* (1 John 4:20)

St. John also goes so far as to state that: *"Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."* (1 John 3:14–15)

In the above passage, why does John equate hatred of one's brother with murder? Isn't that a bit extreme? How are we to make sense of this teaching?

When one person murders another, the murderer acts with complete disregard for the person they are murdering. They act in a judgmental, careless, or indifferent way toward another child of God. The spirit of hatred that leads to murder is either one of judgment and condemnation or one of extreme indifference. The Bible is telling us that when one person hates another, when someone is filled with a spirit of condemnation or indifference toward his or her brother,

the hater is committing a type of spiritual murder of his brother. Jesus calls us not only to refrain from the physical act of murder but also from the act of 'spiritual murder' as the Bible's teaching on murder is not unlike its teaching on adultery.

Jesus said, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* (Matthew 5:27-28)

This passage on adultery could well be paraphrased to apply to hatred of one's brother. For example, 'everyone who hates his brother has already committed murder against him in his heart'. We are therefore called to consecrate not only our actions but also our thoughts to the Lord.

If God's love abides in us, we will love even those who are drenched in sin, even as God loves us. To hate another human being requires one to separate themselves from the love of God, for no one with God's love in his or her heart could ever hate another human being. No one can love God and hate his brother. In order for us to enter heaven, we need to live in communion with God and be full of His love. Hatred of one's brother separates us from the love of God.

While there can be no doubt that there are numerous passages in the Bible about one person hating another, our Lord Jesus revealed to us that our attitude, even toward our enemies, should be one of love and not hatred. Old Tes-

tament passages referring to ‘hating those who hate the Lord’ are interpreted in the light of the Church as a call for us to hate the evil things people do and not the people themselves. Unholy hatred is, therefore, hatred of people.

HOLY HATRED

HATRED OF EVIL AND SIN

The Bible and Church Tradition make it very clear that Christians are called to have a certain kind of hatred in their hearts: hatred of evil and sin. In the well-known prayer of St. Nersess Shnorhali, “I Confess with Faith” (*Havadov Khosdovaneem*), we ask the Lord to give us this spirit of ‘holy hatred’ when we pray, “Strengthen my heart to hate sin and to love thee alone.”

The pairing St. Nersess makes in his prayer of loving God while hating what is sinful or evil has a clear biblical foundation. In the book of Psalms, we read, “*The LORD loves those who hate evil; he preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked.*” (Psalm 97:10). The Book of Psalms also says that God blesses those who ‘hate wickedness.’ In Psalm 45, we read, “*You love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows.*” (Psalm 45:7)

The Book of Proverbs reminds us that *“the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,”* Proverbs 9:10, while also pairing fear of the Lord with hatred of evil. *‘The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil.’* Proverbs 8:13. In Psalm 97:10, hatred of evil is even commanded. *‘O you who love the Lord, hate evil!’*

Both Jesus and St. Paul teach us the importance of hating evil. St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, writes, *“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; (Romans 12:9)* St. Paul also tells us that when he sins, he does what he hates. *“We know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:14-15)*

HATRED OF LIFE IN A SINFUL WORLD

Jesus taught us the importance of holy hatred in the Gospel according to John when He said, *“He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:25).* Why is it that Jesus teaches us that those who hate their lives in this world will be eternally blessed (keep their lives for eternity)?

Scripture frequently reminds us that this world is full of sin and all manner of wickedness and Godlessness. In fact, Jesus speaks of the

devil as being the ruler of this world: *“Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the ruler of this world be cast out.”* (John 12:31) Also, *“I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me”* (John 14:30). And in 2 Corinthians 4, we read, *“The god of this age (the devil) has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”*

God is the ruler of the heavens and will fully rule when heaven is wholly established on earth at the return of Jesus. As for now, however, Jesus says, *“My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.”* (John 18:36)

As Christians, we are all strangers in a foreign land. We are called to be the holy ones living in the midst of this wicked and perverse generation. We are to be the lights in the darkness. We are to be the emissaries of heaven to a world on the brink of hell. It is appropriate for us to live our lives both feeling and expressing our love of God and our hatred of evil. Jesus Himself passionately loved His Father and hated the sin of this world.

Perhaps the best expression of Jesus' passionate hatred of evil can be found in the Gospel according to John. Remember Jesus' actions upon entering Jerusalem on Holy Week. *“The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple, Jesus found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pi-*

geons, and the money-changers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple, and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me."" (John 2:13-17) Jesus' zealous love for His heavenly Father made Him hate the desecration of His Father's house.

May we, like Jesus, be zealous for God. Let us love Him joyfully with all our hearts, souls, and minds. And let us have a sacred hatred for all that is ungodly, sinful, and evil in this world. Let us also despise our own sin so that we might separate ourselves from all that is evil within us and live in complete holiness, lovingly glorifying our creator for all eternity.

Finally, as Christians, we are called to believe that God is always working to bring about good, even when people are intentionally doing evil. God can still use their bad intentions to bring blessings upon the world. St. Paul reminds us of this in Romans 8:28, writing, *"We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good."*

Knowing that God can bring about blessings even when people are acting in incredibly unlovable ways can help us rejoice in the blessings that will eventually emerge from what looks to be, on the surface, only a bad situation. At all times, we believe God's providence is at work for good, even when people are committing unlovable acts.

JOSEPH THE PATRIARCH

One of the most beautiful examples of God's providence at work is in the story of Joseph the Patriarch. Joseph was one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Joseph was Jacob's favorite son, and the brothers knew this. They were so jealous of Joseph that they sold him to a passing caravan of merchants heading for Egypt, who would sell Joseph into slavery. Then the brothers dipped Joseph's coat in goat's blood and showed it to Jacob, telling him, *"Surely Joseph had been mauled to death and eaten by a wild animal."* (Genesis 37:33) Despite their wickedness, God blessed Joseph. He rose from being an Egyptian slave to being the right-hand man of Pharaoh.

Soon, a great famine fell upon all the land, but God had put it in Joseph's head that the famine would happen years before it happened, so the Egyptians were prepared to endure the famine. Eventually, the sons of Jacob, in need of food, came to Egypt to beg for sustenance. Joseph gave them food but also confronted them with selling him into slavery. When he revealed he was their brother, whom they had sold into slavery, they were terrified. After all, Joseph was the second-most powerful man in Egypt. Joseph, however, eased their terror of retribution, saying to them, *"Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. It was not you who sent me here, but God."* (Genesis 45:5, 8)

In the story of Joseph, we see that Joseph believed in Divine providence. The reason he continued to love, and did not condemn his brothers, is because he believed that God had allowed them to do evil to him in order to bring about a greater good. Namely, the salvation of the nation of Egypt and the people of Israel from starvation through famine.

St. Gregory also believed God was at work, even when he was being tortured by King Drtad. St. Gregory kept loving and praying for King Drtad, believing God was acting in the background to bring about positive change. The steadfast love of God, which flowed through St. Gregory, ultimately led to the healing of King Drtad, and his coming to know the love of Christ; and of course, King Drtad's conversion led to the conversion of the nation of Armenia to Christianity.

The stories of the conversion of Armenia, as well as Joseph and his brothers, remind us that to be a Christian is to believe that God is always working to bring about the best result out of a bad situation, even when we are unable to discern how He is acting.

In addition, the Holy Tradition of the Church teaches us to realize we are all sinners, yet God loves us anyway. He loved us and died for us in our sin, setting for us an example to love and lay down our lives for others, even as they too struggle with sin. As the Lord said as He was dying on the Cross: *"Father, forgive them. For they know not what they do."* (Luke 23:34)

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