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Loving Your Enemies? Biblical Truth Still Controversial

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In a world plagued by terrorism and suffering, it seems enemies of the Christian faith, "enemies of God" lurk at every turn. Violence, torture, and senseless oppression are certainly constant themes resonating from national newscasts everywhere. And, as always, a plethora of "spiritual" thinkers and philosophers have emerged from the woodwork to offer their input, valid or invalid as it may be, trying desperately to make sense of it all. One such individual is Rabbi Shmuley Boteach (the self-proclaimed "America's Rabbi": www.shmuley.com), a fiery and highly opinionated Orthodox Jewish rabbi. So many of you may have seen Shmuley appear as a guest across a wide range of talk shows, including The Oprah Winfrey Show. In fact, he has become a member of the Oprah & Friends Network, on XM satellite radio, where his teachings and broadcasts can be heard or downloaded any time, day or night.

Shmuley frequently writes articles covering a broad scope of issues, from relationships, religion, and politics to culture, parenting, and current events. In a recent piece entitled Love the Victims, Loathe Their Killers, dated Monday, December 1, 2008, Shmuley addressed the issue of terrorism in our modern society, particularly the recent Mumbai, India attacks. In doing so, the rabbi greatly misapplied and misinterpreted the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:44: "But I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (New International Version)

According to Shmuley, "...our enemies and God's enemies are different parties altogether. Jesus meant to love those who criticize you to your boss or who swindle you in a business deal. But to love those who indiscriminately murder God's children is an abomination against all that is sacred. Is there a man who is human whose heart is not filled with moral revulsion against terrorists who target a rabbi who feeds the hungry? Would God or Jesus ask me to extend even one morsel of my limited capacity for compassion to fiends, rather than saving every last particle for their victims instead? Could God really be so unreasonable, could Jesus really be so cruel, as to ask me to love baby-killers? And would such a God be moral if he did? Could I pray to a God who loves terrorists? Could I find comfort in Him, knowing that He offers them comfort as well? No, such a God would be my enemy. He would abide in Hades rather than Heaven. And I would be damned before I worship Him. I will accept an eternity in purgatory rather than a moment of celestial bliss shared with these beasts." (www.shmuley.com/articles)

It is unfortunate that the Rabbi's article has been circulated around the Internet and even displayed and supported by certain Christian sites as well. In understanding the command of Christ from Matthew 5, we must remember the historical context of the day. Life was not exactly all hunky-dory for Christians. They were hounded, hunted, and greatly persecuted for their faith and for several years. Many were drug into towering coliseums, often with their entire family, and thrown to lions to be devoured before an audience as a spectator sport. Compared to their lives, we have it easy. We get angry when someone cuts us off in traffic or when a coworker mouths off at us. We tell God life isn't fair when we don't get the pay raise we want or when our bills seem too much to handle.

As Christians, we are called to model our love after the love of God. And if God so loved "the world" (John 3:16) and if He loved the world past, present, and future, then terrorists, murderers and persecutors (past, present and future) are included on God's love list. His grace covers us all. God's love for Emperor Nero, who had countless Christians killed and tortured (54-68 A.D.) is no greater or lesser than his love for Adolph Hitler, Osama Bin Laden or Saddam Hussein. It is no greater or lesser than His love for you and me. It is right for us to be concerned for and pray for these people and it does not mean we support what they do or that we are against justice in the world. In fact, we can simultaneously pray that God would bring them to justice, whether it be His justice or the justice of our own governmental law enforcements (which is really His justice too, because all governments are set in place by God anyway: Romans 13:1-7). Furthermore, we can pray for their salvation. What an amazing testimony to the greatness of God it would be if Christians around the world allied in heart-connected prayer for the souls of Bin Laden, Hussein or other men who represent war and oppressive regimes.

Additionally, Rabbi Boteach's mindset seems to elevate people who commit "lesser" sins above those who commit such acts of terrorism and murder. Again, this goes completely against the teachings of Christ, seeing as how, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23, NIV, emphasis added). Back up a few verses and we additionally discover that, "As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one...' (Romans 3:10, NIV, emphasis added). Because sin is sin, I am no more righteous than someone who has committed murder. King David, who God Himself called "one after His own heart..." (1 Samuel 13:13-14), was an adulterer (2 Samuel 11) and murderer (2 Samuel 11:6-16). One time, while on the run from Saul, David pretended to be mentally insane so that he would not be recognized as his kingly self (1 Samuel 21:10-15).

How on earth can we testify to the redeeming, life-transforming power of the grace of God, a grace we talk about on Sundays at church and in close-knit circles of Christian friends, and not love the lost, hurting sinner? Why do we view a terrorist, child-molester, or murderer as somehow being lost beyond the reach of God's love and grace? Why are we willing to go door to door to witness to total strangers or coworkers, but shy away from a prison cell ministry opportunity? So often we limit the abilities of our Savior; we limit his greatness and redemptive power. Calvary was for everyone. Grace is for everyone. It is not for us to decide that someone, anyone, is unworthy of God's love and grace, while we sit in our church pews and say that we are worthy of His grace. Remember, we serve a God who desires, "...all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4, NIV)