

57At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

It's not possible to respond as Stephen in human strength. It requires God in us to make this happen. Ref Philippians 2:13:

"For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him." – Philippians 2:13

Notice Stephen's last words "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Sounds very similar to Jesus' last words on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." The same Spirit that was in Jesus, was in Stephen and is in you today if you live your life for Christ.

... a man named Saul was mentioned as being present at the stoning of Stephen. I believe Stephen's example of sacrificial love for those that hated him, was a key point in Saul's life that later allowed him to surrender his life fully to Jesus Christ.

"No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us." – 1 John 4:12

People only see and experience God's love, if we as Christians allow God to demonstrate it in us. Saul saw God's love in Stephen's life and his response to those that were his enemies. Loving your enemies, and those different than you, isn't just good for the person receiving the love. It's not just necessary for you because it forces you to forgive, to love and be free from bitterness. It's necessary for others to see Christ through your life... you never know what friend, co-worker, neighbor or loved your actions may effect. It might just be the one thing that causes them to change their life forever and start living for God.

The Message, Matthew 5:43-44:

"You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty.

or fellow Christians. One thing I see the people at Life Church doing extremely well is loving each other. Ref 1 John

As Jesus says though, we can't just stop at loving our 'brothers' or those who show love to us...

Who are the enemies in your life? Who are those in your life that are different than you that are difficult to love? Who is that individual that has hurt you in the past? Which group of people do you just find it difficult to love?

How do we express our love to our enemies, those different than us:

- **Pray for them** – Matthew 5:44
- **Exceed their expectations** - “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” Matthew 5:38-42
- **Go out of your way to serve** - “If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.” – Exodus 23:4-5
- **Help meet their needs** - “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.” – Proverbs 25:21
- **Forgive them** - “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34

Love is sacrificial. It costs you something.

YOU

It's not us that forces a love for our enemies.

“For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.” – Philippians 2:13

To release God's power and live out God's love → we must be a house of prayer (like we talked about last week).

Next Steps – VIP Prayer Card

1. VIP Prayer Card – write down your enemies
2. Pray through this card

While you're filling those out, I want to have Terri LeDune come up and share about how she's living this out in her life.

WE

What would our lives look like if we lived out Jesus' call to love our enemies? How would our families be impacted if our children saw us as parents respond in love to someone that hurt us? How would our friendships change if when someone offended us, we reacted with love instead of revenge or anger. How would our community change if we made an effort to reach out to those that no one else is reaching out to? To love those that no one else is loving?

Stephen's Story: ends Acts 7:57-60

ME

Story: Giving Courtney flowers out of obligation vs. love.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, **but have not love**, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, **but have not love, I am nothing**. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, **but have not love, I gain nothing.**” – 1 Corinthians 13:1

Scott's addition: *If I give cards, candy and flowers to my wife out of obligation, but have not love, I am still in trouble.*

*29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this...
30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. 'There is no commandment greater than these."
- Mark 12:29-31*

Living in diverse times: almost elected first lady as president; we may have first African American president; may elect one of oldest presidents → none are status quo candidate

WE

Perhaps you wrestle with this command? “Love your neighbor as yourself.” What does this mean? Who are our neighbors? What does this look like?

Turn your Bible to Matthew chapter 5

Illustration: Who is it easy to love? Who is it hard to love?

Easy – family, friends, other Christians, coworkers, peers
→ people like us

Hard – homeless, jobless, rich, person addicted to drugs/alcohol, gay/lesbian community, someone just released from prison, child molester, murder, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, person with HIV/AIDS, person that's had an abortion, terrorists, illegal immigrants, people with unresolved conflicts → people different than us and people that have hurt us

If you're in any of these groups or have been given these labels and hurt by Christians ... apologize, forgiveness, God loves you, LC is a place feel welcomed, accepted and loved.

GOD

*"You have heard that it was said, '**Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.** 44 But I tell you: **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** 45 that you may be sons 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. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?' - Matthew 5:43-47*

It's easy to love those people like us, people that we get along with. The Bible actually talks a lot about loving our “brothers”