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Psalms 27:2, New International Version.

*² When the wicked advance against me
to devour me,
it is my enemies and my foes
who will stumble and fall.*

Allies vs. enemies?

The Old Testament is filled with statements like verse 2 of Psalms, Chapter 27:

*² When the wicked advance against me
to devour me,
it is my enemies and my foes
who will stumble and fall.*

The Israelites were constantly turning to God for protection from their enemies.

The Psalms of David repeatedly ask for delivery from his enemies. We see similar pleas by God's People in Numbers, Daniel, Exodus, Proverbs, etc., etc. But remember, these people live in a world surrounded by tribes who speak other languages, worship other gods, and who want them dead. It makes sense that much of the Old Testament feels like us vs. them – or more precisely, allies vs. enemies. Who were their allies? There weren't many, and allies tended to be quite temporary. But their enemies were plentiful: Amalekites, Canaanites, Moabites, Philistines, Egyptians, etc., etc. But this is not the story of the New

Testament. We love God. We love our neighbors. We forgive. The New Covenant teaches us that our Kingdom is not an earthly Kingdom.

But more and more, our society, American society, is trying to send us back to Old Testament times. We are very literally, and I quote many vocal people when I say this, supposed to view other people as falling only into two separate groups: our allies, people who are armed and stand shoulder to shoulder with us, ready to kill, and our enemies, people who want to kill us and whom we will do our best to destroy. Seeing them dead would be best for our enemies, but if we cannot do that, we must destroy them socially, isolate and condemn them, silence and cancel them. But, of course, the vast majority of people whom we encounter fall into neither category. We cannot expect everyone to be our allies and fight for our personal causes. And in Matthew, Jesus speaks about enemies:

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor ² and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

This is a long way from aggressively collecting enemies. Jesus wanted us to work hard to not count people as our enemies. I would have liked to see how Jesus would have navigated social media, with everyone telling him that any person who is not his ally is to be considered an enemy – and treated accordingly.

I think there is a reason for why there is such terrible division in society, why people feel that they must consider other people as their enemies if they are

not actively serving as allies. People know something intuitively, something that Jesus taught us. But since they aren't believers, since they have not put their full trust in God, they only know half the story. Here is that first half, a lesson that all of us know. This is from the Gospel of Mark. A man engages Jesus:

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

There it is. We are all imperfect. We all fail. Jesus was simply stating that the only truly and entirely good being in the world is God. Jesus is God, but he was also human, and so he fully understood our imperfection, the tendency to do wrong, that lies within each of us. It's clear why people look for enemies.

Knowing this lesson intuitively, but not being rooted in faith, not living in the Kingdom of God but being stuck in the world around them, people do not know the other half of the story. I think that this is one of the most important lessons that we can learn, and with guidance from God, we can use this to give purpose and power to the rest of our earthly lives. What is that other half of the lesson?

We get a glimpse of the challenge that we confront in life, and of the nature of that second part of the lesson by going back to our quote from Matthew, about loving our enemies – and seeing it to its end:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who

persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

As we strive to not have enemies, to turn to potential enemies with love, we see the challenge that God has given us. If we truly want to be people of faith, if we want to be children of the God who made all of creation, we must treat all people, and not just active allies, with love. Once we can do that, we will be like God. We will be perfect.

But of course, we can never be like God. We can never be perfect. We can, however, improve. That is what the life of a Christian is all about. The Bible is filled with advice on how to do this. In Romans, Chapter 12, Paul tells us this:

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Do not conform to the standards of the world. That is number one. We must resist the draw of the world, television, the Internet, and social media. It is the world of people, not the Kingdom of God, that teaches anger, hatred, and the cultivation of enemies. Yes, people are highly imperfect. By looking for the good in them and improving ourselves, we are set free from the need to see only evil.

Importantly, it isn't true that there is a day and night difference between the Old and the New Testaments. There is much in the Old Testament that teaches about love, kindness and forgiveness. It is particularly powerful that the same people who were surrounded by physical enemies strove to show love. This is Proverbs 16:3: ³*Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.* If we offer up whatever we do in life to God, God will in turn help us ensure that whatever it is we have to offer is as close to perfection as possible.

Here is another one from the Old Testament, from Joshua. These are the words of Joshua. Moses has just died, at the threshold of Canaan, the home of the Chosen People. Joshua has been named the leader of his people, the replacement of Moses. He is speaking to his people as they settle in their home:

⁹*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."*

He is telling his people how they can approach a standard they will never meet, perfection. They are to be courageous, to not live in fear, to never be discouraged, and to remember that God is with them every step in life.

Here is one that is very often forgotten. It is from James, the brother of Jesus. It tells us what personal trait often enables us to become closer to perfect:

⁴ But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Being patient with other people, being patient with God, offering other people grace and waiting on God with deep trust, this is the way to prepare our souls to go to work on that lifelong process of becoming better.

These are the words of Jesus, as quoted in the Gospel of Luke:

³⁷ “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Don't judge others, don't condemn others, and forgive others, and in turn, God will offer you the same level of grace. In other words, there is more to this process of self-improvement than simply striving to be perfect, to be as much like God as is humanly possible. There is a very tangible reward: God will refuse to see us as an enemy. God will embrace us with eternal love, something that we can feel in our hearts and souls and minds every day of our life, and something that will carry us through all of eternity.

We can release ourselves from anger, from bitterness, from viewing other people as having let us down or not having understood our perspective or having treated us with disrespect. We can free ourselves from the demand that society thrusts upon us – to draw a sharp line and put a handful of people on one side and call them our allies, and then to put all other people on the other side and call

them our enemies. We can approach perfection. We can live with peace and grace. We can turn the Kingdom of God from an abstract concept into something that we feel surrounding us as we proceed through life.

I firmly believe that the idea of being “saved” by having faith is very short-sighted and very limiting. Having faith and truly living that faith out by refusing to see the world as consisting of allies and enemies makes our life today and our eternal life a true joy. Yes, there is evil in the world. But working to see the good in others and working to treat others with grace, just as Jesus did, that is how we can keep that evil from infecting us. That is how we cast off evil.

When I was a child, I had a friend whose father died from lung cancer. He had five brothers and one sister. We’ll call him Morry, and I might have talked about him before. They lived in a three-bedroom house, with the six brothers all bunking together in one room so that the lone girl could have privacy. The house was always in chaos. During the months when his father was dying, his dad was usually sitting up in a bed, in the living room, with the wild life of that house spinning around him. He wanted to be with his kids as much as possible near the end. A few years after he died, Morry’s mother remarried. That man instantly embraced his seven new children. I was probably in about sixth grade. I think I

might have shared with you that the first time after his mother remarried that I went over to Morry's house to play with him, I knocked on the door. His new dad answered the door. I asked if Morry could play. He said, "Which one is that?"

But seriously, he was a very good man. We'll call him Mr. Kelly. I was once down the street with Morry playing as dusk came. Mr. Kelly came looking for us, so that Morry could go to dinner. I vividly remember Morry calling him his father, not his stepfather. Mr. Kelly jogged up and told Morry it was dinner time, so he had to come home. Mr. Kelly invited me. Now, these were not people with a lot of money. But Mr. Kelly always made a point of welcoming the friends of his adopted children. I said sure, and minutes later, after calling my parents to get permission, I was sitting at their very crowded dinner table. Mr. Kelly started dinner with a prayer. I don't remember his exact words, but he first thanked God for the food we were all about to eat. Then he thanked God for creating the man who had been the first father of his beautiful children, and he asked God to help him, Mr. Kelly, live up to the standard set by that man.

Mr. Kelly was a man who walked with God. He was truly amazing. He worked very hard, spent his non-working hours with his family, and thanked God for the gift he had been given in having that family. I am sure that he was quite

imperfect. But he looked for people on whom he could shower grace. He grew that circle during his life, including seven adopted kids and the friends of those kids. He was just a regular guy, like my father, a World War II veteran, a blue-collar worker, and someone who was quite happy with a simple life. I assume he has passed away by now, as he would be well over a hundred. Obviously, there is much I don't know about that man. But I imagine that the day came when he transitioned from this world to the eternal world. I imagine that this transition was seamless because it wasn't much of a transition at all. When we reach out with love for those around us, when we work to be as perfect as we can, when we root out people to be good to, and not people whom we expect to be our allies or people who we insist will be our enemies, we bring God's Kingdom into this world. We become an active force for making the world of people, here on Earth, a piece of the Kingdom of God.

I hope that our society can move beyond the age of conflict, of looking for enemies, of seeing the bad in people. When we say that if we all lived like Jesus that the world would be peaceful, we mean that if we could live like Jesus, our love, our grace, our faith would transform the ground upon which we walk into a true path through the Kingdom of God. Anyone else who happens to intersect with our steps will find themselves captured in that Kingdom, a Kingdom of joy.

Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for filling our hearts, our minds, and our souls with grace. That is what gives us the calm and the confidence to search out the good in others. We ask you to help us avoid evil at all times, but to never see evil when it is not there. Help us turn all people into empathetic, kind, and forgiving people. Amen.