

GLEANINGS — September 13, A.D. 2015  
Coals of Fire?

"If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again."  
(Exodus 23:4)

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the LORD see it, and it displease Him, and He turn away His wrath from him." (Proverbs 24:17-18)

"If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you." (Proverbs 25:21-22)

Though hard to hear and easily misapplied, what saying of Christ is more generally known than, "**love your enemies**?" (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35).

Jesus Himself is of course the prime example of an enemy lover, and those whom He has redeemed by His own precious blood are the greatest examples of enemies turned into friends by the love of Him Who first loved them. For "...God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

The three Old Testament citations above show that in uttering that hard saying, Jesus was not introducing a brand new ethical standard. Rather, as when He spoke of the two greatest commandments (*compare Matthew 22:35-40 with Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18*), He was magnifying the beauty and holiness of God's Law and correcting those who misused God's delightful Law.

(Such pharisaical abusers of the law are to be found today, giving God's law and those who love it a bad name. They put a stumbling block in the path of those who might otherwise embrace verses like Roman 3:31 "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law!" and 1 Timothy 1:8 "But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully.")

The old covenant Scriptures instruct God's people of today in HOW one is to love his enemies; how we are to be doers and not merely assenters. "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." (Romans 15:4)

Exodus 23:4, a case study in enemy loving, is rather straightforward. An application for those of us not very likely to encounter wandering donkeys in day to day life might be, "if you see your enemy sitting in his pick-up truck with a dead battery, get your jumper cables out and help him get his engine started. Then, in order to make sure he gets there without further mishap, follow him that extra mile to his local repair shop."

But what about this matter of "heaping coals of fire on his head?" At first blush, this seems like the very opposite of helping an enemy with his burden bearing equipment (living or inanimate), or giving him food and water, or keeping one's heart from being glad about his troubles.

As Bible commentator Matthew Henry has pointed out, we should think of this statement with the ancient smelting furnace in mind. The intense heat that melted the metal was not only placed beneath it, but poured on from above in the form of hot coals. Kindness to our enemies has that melting effect. To use a good old fashioned word, it MOLLIFIES them...calms their anger, amazes their minds, stirs up and perhaps convicts their consciences for their ultimate good.

And if an enemy is too hardened to be mollified, those acts of kindness will further harden him, and in the day when God (to Whom alone vengeance belongs) arises, the Scripture will be fulfilled which says, "...in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds." (Romans 2:5,6)

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:21)