

The steps towards love of one's enemies, according to St. John Chrysostom  
With added commentary drawn from the spiritual guidance of St. Silouan the Athonite

1. **The first step is not to be the first to cause harm.**
2. **The second step is not to take revenge in the measure one has suffered.**

While the two first degrees do not seem to concern the love of enemies, they are its preconditions. The tendency to attack one's enemies or to take revenge is instinctive and spontaneous, and receives its approbation from the Old Testament law of retaliation when taken in its most literal meaning.

3. **The third step is not to take revenge at all, but to leave that to God,** as the Apostle Paul said: "Recompense to no man evil for evil" (Rom. 12:17); "Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). St. Isaac the Syrian gives the same advice: "Let yourself be persecuted, but do not persecute. Let yourself be crucified, but do not crucify. Let yourself be insulted, but do not insult."

4. **The fourth step is not to resist.**

This attitude was advised by Christ: "But I say unto you that you resist no evil" (Matt. 5:39).

5. **The fifth step is not to be irritated by what our enemies do to us, but to bear, to show patience, to endure all we are made to suffer,**

following the example and exhortation of the Apostle: "Being persecuted, we suffer it" (1 Cor. 4:12), and "For ye suffer if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face" (2 Cor. 11:20).

6. **The sixth step is not to get inwardly upset about insults, abuse, trials and affliction that our enemies make us suffer,**

or as St. Simeon the New Theologian puts it: "not to turn a hair during trials and to have an equable and uniform attitude towards those who abuse one face-to-face, who accuse, persecute, condemn, insult, spit, or even to those who make a show of friendship and behind one's back act in the same way that they can't completely hide."

7. **The seventh step is to consider offenses as a gift, to rejoice about them, and to thank God for them.**

He who has reached this step understands the meaning of these words of Christ: "Blessed are you, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake" (Matt. 5:11). The Fathers advise us to consider the person who offends us as a physician providentially come to cure our souls of its diseases, particularly pride and vainglory. They emphasize the profit one can gain from what one is made to suffer. St. Zosima said, "If someone remembers a brother who has hurt, injured, or insulted him, he must regard him as a doctor and benefactor sent by Christ. If you get upset in these circumstances, it means your soul is sick."

Indeed, if you were not sick, you would not suffer. So give thanks to this brother, for through him you know your illness. Pray for him and receive what comes from him as medicine sent to you by the Lord.” St. John of Gaza writes, “If we are just, the trial sent us [by our enemies] is for our progress, and if we are unjust, it is for the remission of sins and our improvement; it is also an exercise and a lesson in endurance.”

8. **The eighth step is to offer yourself voluntarily to suffer offenses.**

This attitude is advised by Christ and recorded for us in the Gospel. “Whosoever shall strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:39).

9. **The ninth step is to want to suffer more than one is asked to endure.**

10. **The tenth step is to feel no hate for those who ill treat us.**

11. **The eleventh step is to feel no rancor, wrath, or re-resentment towards our ene-mies.** St. John Climacus wrote, “Charity is first of all to reject every thought of enmity, because charity thinks no ill” (1 Cor. 13:5).

12. **The twelfth step is not to accuse our enemies, not to criticize them, not to speak ill of them, not even to reveal the harm they have done to us.**

13. **The thirteenth step is not to despise them.**

14. **The fourteenth step is to feel no trace of aversion or repulsion towards them.**

15. **The fifteenth step is not to feel the slightest bitterness towards them or to the memory of what they have done to us nor the slightest sadness.**

16. **The sixteenth step is not to judge them at all and only to consider one’s own faults.** This in answer to Christ’s teaching to “Judge not, that ye be not judged.... [and] Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye” (Matt. 7:1-3)?

17. **The seventeenth step is to sincerely forgive them.**

This attitude makes us worthy to petition God for the forgiveness of our own faults as the Lord taught us, asking “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matt. 6:12), and shows that we take seriously the words of Christ that “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matt. 6:14). This forgiveness in its highest form does not even remember what one has suffered. St. Simeon the New Theologian notes that in this degree, love of enemies consists in “covering with total oblivion what one has suffered” so that we “think of nothing that has happened, whether the persecutors are present or absent.”

Still these seventeen first steps don't take us into what is love proper although they form indispensable conditions and preparatory stages one must pass. Love is not simply the absence of enmity but rather is superior to it. In this respect St. Maximus the Confessor writes, "To feel no envy, no wrath, no bitterness towards the offender does not yet mean to have love for him." One can, without any love, avoid rendering evil for evil because of the commandment. Not to hate someone does not yet mean to love him. One can feel for him something between the two that is neither love nor hate. It is the following steps that will bring us to real love.

18. **The eighteenth step is to strive to be reconciled with one's enemies as ordained by Christ:** "First be reconciled with thy brother" (Matt. 5:24), "Agree with thine adversary quickly, while thou art in the way with him" (Matt. 5:25). By this attitude we show a desire for union that is the foundation of love, contrary to which is the tendency toward division and separation.

19. **The nineteenth step is to feel pity and compassion for them.** This attitude is in answer to Christ's counsel, given in the context of His teaching on the love of enemies. "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful" (Luke 6:36). This is how St. Isaac the Syrian describes him who has real compassion for all beings in creation, and so also for his enemies: "When he thinks of them, and when he sees them, tears run from his eyes. So strong and so violent is his compassion, and so great is his constancy that it wrings his heart and he can't bear to hear or to see the least harm or the slightest sadness in creation."

20. **The twentieth step implies renouncing being avenged by God but also wishing that He will not punish our enemies.**

The Apostle's instruction—"Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath, for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19)—seems to have been given to beginners hardly able to give up their own revenge. This twentieth step consists positively in wanting God to forgive our enemies, to keep and save them.

21. **The twenty-first step is to pray to God for them.** This attitude is in answer to Christ's command to "pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you" (Matt. 5:44, Luke 6:28). It is evident so far that praying for enemies is implied, but to this point, it has been a means of avoiding and being purified from undesirable attitudes like hate, spite, resentment, and pride. In the higher stages, prayer is no longer for oneself but for the other: it leads to compassion and to love for the enemy and permits positive attitudes to develop and strengthen. It consists in asking God to take pity on him, forgive him his sins, save him, and give him what is best. A sorrowful heart and tears are the sign that the prayer is deep, sincere, and motivated by real compassion. St. Isaac the Syrian writes "He who is compassionate prays tearfully, at all hours, for the animals without reason, for the enemies of truth, and for all who harm him, so that they be kept and forgiven." "He who loves his enemies," says St. Maximus, "will even suffer for them if the chance is given to him."

22. **The twenty-second step is to have affection for them.** St. Simeon notes that at this level love consists in “loving them from the bottom of the soul, and more still in engraving in oneself the face of each one of them, to kiss them impassibly as true friends with tears of sincere charity.”

23. **The twenty-third step, then, is to begin to wish and do them good.** This attitude is in answer to the commandments of Christ to “bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you” (Matt. 5:44; cf Luke 6:27-28), to “love you your enemies and do good” (Luke 6:35), and “as you would that men should do to you, do you also to them likewise” (Luke 6:31). These commandments the Apostle repeats, saying, “Bless them which persecute you, bless and curse not” (Rom. 12:14), “Provide things honest in the sight of all men” (Rom. 12:17), and “Therefore if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink” (Rom. 12:20). In their behavior, the Apostles show the attitude “being reviled, we bless” (1 Cor. 4:12).

When a man who was being ill-treated asked him how to act, St. John of Gaza had only one answer: “Do good to him.” St. Isaac advises to “Show the greatness of your compassion by rendering good to those who were unjust to you,” and he writes that “it is a great thing to do good to sinners more than to the just.” St. Maximus teaches that one only really loves when one is able to “return naturally good for evil” and that “to be capable of doing good to those who hate us is only given to perfect spiritual love.” Love, then, does not only consist of doing good to our enemies, but also in thinking well of them.

24. **The twenty-fourth step is to consider those who harm us in the same way as those who do us good and to love them in the same way.** St. Barsanuphios teaches that one must manage “to consider he who strikes as he who caresses, he who despises as he who esteems, he who insults as he who honors, he who afflicts as he who consoles.” More than all the Fathers, St. Maximus advises us to treat all men equally and to love them all without making any difference, friends or enemies, just or sinners. He wrote, “Blessed the man who can love all men equally.... He who is good and impassive, by the disposition of his will, loves equally all men, the just for their nature and their good disposition, the sinners for their nature and with the compassionate pity one has for a fool wandering in the night.” He adds that “perfect love loves all men equally. He loves the virtuous as friends, and the depraved as enemies.... If you detest some people and feel for others neither love nor hate, if you love these but moderately and those very much, know by this inequality that you are still far from perfect, as [perfect love] loves all men equally.” Indeed “the friends of Christ truly love all beings.” St. Isaac the Syrian gives the same teaching: “Consider all men, whether unbelievers or murderers, as equal in good and honor, and that each one by his nature is your brother, even if without knowing it he has wandered from the truth.... Compassion,” he says “is a sadness born from grace; it feels for all beings with the same affection.... He who loves all beings equally, with compassion and discernment, has reached perfection.”

25. **The twenty-fifth step is to treat our enemies in the same way as our friends.** “He who really loves his enemies,” writes St. Simeon, is capable of “receiving them too as friends at meeting for meals, without at all returning to the past.” St. John Chrysostom says the same: “We act towards them who have harmed us as towards real friends, and love them as ourselves.”

26. **The twenty-sixth step is to love our enemies not only as ourselves, but more than ourselves.** Charity, says St. Maximus, “leads harmoniously to this praiseworthy inequality through which each prefers his neighbor to himself, as much as in the past he wanted to push him to the side and put himself forward.” In the Apophthegmata, we read that the monks of Sketes in the desert west of the Nile Delta sought to love their enemies even more than themselves.

If one examines the teaching of St. Silouan on the love of enemies, one notices that while he is not unaware of the elementary steps, he mostly considers the higher levels. This confirms what we have already said, that the teaching of the starets is the expression of a personal experience at the highest level of spiritual life.

For the person as yet unable to love his enemies, St. Silouan teaches that at least he must not hate them, curse them, or snub them, and must refuse thoughts of anger against them. In that way at least progress is made towards love.

The love of enemies implies that one not only must bear the afflictions that they make us suffer, but also that one suffers them with joy for God’s sake. It also implies correlatively that one thanks God for all these afflictions. As we have seen, they contribute to our spiritual progress and for this reason must be received as a providential gift of God for our salvation.

The love of enemies also implies that, face-to-face with the violence one suffers, one should maintain peace of soul and body. In other words, not only must one not show irritation in return, but one must not even become agitated. Starets Silouan also recommends that in learning to not accuse his enemies, one must not think badly about them or even judge them at all. Rather than accuse others, we must feel guilty ourselves.

For the starets, the love of enemies supposes that one forgives them their offenses and prays for them. But forgiving is not yet loving; prayer can precede love and not yet be a manifestation of it. “When I was still in the world, I liked to forgive with all my heart,” he said. “I forgave easily and I liked to pray for those who had offended me, but when I came to the monastery, while I was still a novice, I received a great grace and it taught me to love my enemies.”

St. Silouan sees compassion as one of the principal dimensions of the love of enemies. Such compassion consists first of all in feeling pity for them. This pity is partly a result of being conscious that those who harm us or want to do so have a sick soul and act under a demonic influence. In this condition, they suffer profoundly. To the question, "How can a subordinate keep a peaceful soul if his superior is a violent and bad man?" the starets answers, "An irascible man endures great suffering caused by a bad spirit. He suffers torment because of his pride. The subordinate must know this and pray for the sick soul of his superior."

On the other hand, this pity results from the knowledge that he who causes harm and is opposed to the truth or doesn't know it, lives aloof from God, deprives himself of His gifts, wanders far from the way to salvation, and is heading for the plains of hell, the beginning of which he already suffers here on earth. "The soul has compassion for enemies and prays for them because they have wandered away from the truth and are going to hell.... A good man thinks, 'each man who has wandered far from the truth is going to his fall,' and this is why he feels pity for him.... He who has been taught by the Holy Spirit to love will suffer all his life for those who don't save themselves. Many tears run down his cheeks for mankind, and the divine grace gives him strength to love his enemies.... They are to be pitied who don't know God and are opposed to Him—my heart suffers for them and tears run down my cheeks. We can clearly see both Paradise and the torments—we know this through the Holy Spirit, and the Lord Himself said, "the Kingdom of God is in you" (Luke 17:21). So eternal life already starts here on earth, and the eternal torments too start here."

We see here that pity is accompanied by compassion, that it consists in suffering what others are suffering as if one felt it oneself, in showing true solidarity with them in their suffering, in putting oneself in their place in their troubles. Such is an authentic and unlimited love. The starets gives us an example of his own compassion that is deeply lived, is accompanied by pain and tears, and is permanent. It is as deep as what one feels for one's loved ones when they are in pain or trouble. "The Lord teaches us to love enemies in such a way that we will feel compassion for them as for our own children." We must, says the starets, be compassionate not only for our own enemies and the enemies of truth, but for the demons who suffer infernal pains for turning away from God and denying Him in their voluntary deprivation of heavenly goods, their refusal to love God and to be loved by Him. "Taught by the Holy Spirit, one will feel compassion even for demons, for they are separated from goodness, they have lost humility and God's love." For the starets, compassion for enemies is linked to the compassion one must have for all creatures without exception: "One must feel compassion for every person, every creature and all of God's creation."

"The Spirit of God teaches us to love all that exists, and the soul feels compassion for each being, and also loves enemies and pities demons, because in their fall they were detached from the good." Compassion makes no exceptions. "There are people who wish damnation and the torments in the fire of hell for their enemies or enemies of the Church. They think in this way because they haven't learned from the Holy Spirit to love God. He who has learned love weeps for the whole world! You say, 'Let him burn in the

fire of hell!’ But I ask you, ‘If God gave you a good place in Paradise and that from there you could see in the fire the man to whom you wished this torment, wouldn’t you feel pity for him, whoever he is, even if he is an enemy to the Church?’ Or do you have a heart of metal?”

The starets felt so much pity and compassion for those who have to endure the sufferings of hell because he had himself experienced the beatitude of Paradise and the dreadful wretchedness of hell, and he knew the painful distance that separated both. For him, the love of enemies implies wishing and doing good to them. He who loves his enemies wants what is best for them—that they should repent, know God, and obtain the grace of salvation. “We must only have one thought,” says St. Silouan “that all be saved.”

Another factor of the love of enemies on which St. Silouan insists is prayer. “It is a great work in God’s eyes to pray for those who offend us and who make us suffer.” For the starets, prayer for and love of enemies are intimately connected. “The Lord has given on earth the Holy Spirit who teaches the soul to love our enemies and to pray for them.... Lord, teach us through your Holy Spirit to love our enemies and to pray for them with tears.... Lord, as You prayed for your enemies, teach us also, through the Holy Spirit, to love our enemies.... The soul that has been taught to pray by the grace of God loves with compassion all creatures, and especially man.”

Prayer indeed awakens in us love for our enemies, and at the same time results from love and is a witness to it. Prayer not only awakens the love of enemies, the love of enemies awakens prayer.

Praying for enemies first permits one to obtain from God the grace to love them. “One can only love one’s enemies through the grace of the Holy Spirit. That’s why, as soon as someone has hurt you, pray to God for him.... To have a peaceful soul, one must get used to loving him who has offended us and to pray immediately for him. The soul cannot have peace if it doesn’t with all its strength ask the Lord for the gift of loving all men.” But prayer is also what permits us to retain the grace of loving enemies once it has been obtained. “The man who hasn’t been taught by the Holy Spirit to love will certainly not pray for his enemies.” The pity and compassion that one feels for enemies, conscious that they have wandered away from God, are deprived of divine goods and are heading for their ruin, lead one to pray for their escape from the ills they will have to suffer. They also lead one to pray to God for them to repent and turn away from their bad ways, for them to know him and be saved. “The Lord has given on earth the Holy Spirit who teaches the soul to love enemies and pray for them so that they will be saved. That is love.... The man who carries in him the Holy Spirit has a heart full of compassion for all of God’s creatures and especially for the people who don’t know God or are opposed to Him and who for this reason will go into the tormenting fire. He prays day and night—more than for himself—for them all to repent and know the Lord.... ‘Lord, all peoples are the work of Your hands; turn them away from hate and wickedness to repentance so that they all may know Your love.’”