

LESSONS IN LIVING

Love Begins When We Listen

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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For all his wisdom, Dr. King turned to scripture to deepen his understanding. It was as though he had an ongoing conversation with Jesus. Listen to his words.

I am certain that Jesus understood the difficulty inherent in the act of loving one's enemy. He never joined the ranks of those who talked glibly about the easiness of the moral life. He realized that every genuine expression of love grows out of a consistent and total surrender to God. So when Jesus said love your enemy, he was not unmindful of its stringent qualities. Yet he meant every word of it. Our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command and to seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:43-48 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

It's a little daunting isn't it? *Just be perfect.* I hardly need to preach now. (laughter) Our second reading comes from Proverbs, and Proverbs, if you've ever read Proverbs, it's sort of like being in an avalanche of fortune cookies, like the short little sayings that don't always make sense and aren't always applicable, but, it is Solomon, and this is going through the 15th chapter, verses taken by a desperate preacher.

A foolish person despises a parent's teaching. The one who heeds their correction is wise. There is severe discipline for one who forsakes the way and those who hate a rebuke will die. Scoffers do not like to be rebuked; they will not go to the wise. Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife, but those who are slow to anger calm contention. Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed. The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the body. The ear that heeds wholesome admonition will live among the wise. Those who ignore instruction despise themselves, but those who heed admonition gain understanding. The humble awareness is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor.

Loving your enemies is a sermon that Martin Luther King gave in a bunch of different forms. It was one of his stock sermons and some of his best stuff. You find it in different versions, but every one of them that I've found starts off by talking about how hard this one saying is, "to love your enemies". He says it's the hardest of Jesus' sayings possibly. It almost sounds like a contradiction in terms. I mean how can you love somebody and have them be your enemy? It's a very tough ball to juggle. So we are going to look at that and we are going to ask three questions of the text. The first is what in the heck is he talking about, what does this mean "to love your enemies"? The second is why should we love our enemies, it's kind of important to know why that is a good idea. And then third, the fifty thousand dollar question, how do you do that? Jesus didn't talk about *how* a lot. I don't know if you ever noticed that. Some great

advice, but very tough in application. We'll talk a little bit about that too, it's on purpose. Buddha did a lot of the same kind of just very pure teaching and the point is to wake up your mind, wake up your heart. A loving teacher doesn't want to tell you what to do; they want you to be fully yourself, and that's what is happening in the sermon on the mount, in spite of what the church has done to that.

A burden off your shoulders is Jesus didn't say to *like* your enemies, and that may sound like a trivial point but it's very, very large. Whatever Jesus means by loving another person, doesn't mean that your heart won't flutter when someone comes into the room if they have abused you. If someone is being mean to you or cruel to you, it doesn't mean that you're not going to feel tension when you are with them. If somebody is in the process of hurting you, you *can't* forgive them yet. That would be to minimize the violence, to dishonor yourself and that other person. So this isn't kind of a mindless sort of numbing of our feelings, but it is learning that sometimes those grievances become wounds, and if we don't deal with them at some point, they become wounds that can often hurt us worse than the person did when they wronged us. So, what does Jesus mean when he says "love your enemies"? What is the difference between anger, which is necessary, and hatred? One of the differences is you disconnect. You can be very angry with somebody--that saying that Jesus says on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is anger, it's despair, but the connection is still there. So whatever you feel about another person, whatever anger you feel, whatever passion you feel, until the disconnect takes place, that's still very possibly a healthy relationship. The other is you want them to hurt; you want them to hurt real bad. When you're angry you can just want somebody to wake up, and maybe you want them to get a bruise or something. But in hatred you are dreaming about burning houses with their face against the window (Laughter), you know how that is. If love means wishing for someone's happiness, then hatred is not wanting that--it's wanting the person not to succeed, not to be full and complete. So whereas anger is a very realistic and important feeling to deal with, hatred is something else. How many times has it happened to you?

We are going to talk about *how* first. It seems like how is the hard part. But I don't really think that's true. I think we know how, we just don't want to do it. Maybe I should speak in the first tense. In my own experience very often I know how to forgive somebody, how to love somebody, but I don't want to do it. Not while I'm still mad, not while I'm still hurting. How many times has it happened to you where there is someone you thought was an absolute creep and you learned one thing about them and you were able to stand in their shoes and you understood it. Didn't mean you agreed, didn't mean you didn't need to resist them, but it meant all of a sudden that entire situation was transformed. You may still be angry at them, but you didn't hate them, there was a difference, a shift that took place. What Jesus is saying is that's always the case; that when we hate another person, there is something we don't know. If we had been raised in the same crib, had the same things happen, the same traumas, with the same temperament, we would probably be doing very similar things. It doesn't justify it. It doesn't mean that you agree with it. But it's different when we understand it.

Solomon is considered in scripture the wisest person who ever lived. Solomon understood things from the inside out. When he prayed for wisdom, he did a very interesting prayer. Does anybody remember what that was? He prayed for a listening heart, a listening heart. You remember the story where two women come before Solomon; one is the mother of the baby and the other is just jealous that she lost her child and now she is jealous of the woman who has a child--they come before Solomon and there is no way from the outside you're going to figure that out. No lie detector test, nothing like that. No Oprah, no Judge Judy, none of that. So what did he do? He went into the people and said "what is the difference between a person who is jealous and a person who loves the child?" What would the real mother feel that the jealous woman would not feel? So what he realized is that the jealous person would rather lose the baby than have the other person have that joy. Whereas the real mother would rather lose the baby to someone else

than have it hurt. So he acted like the typical unfeeling potentate and said O.K. you are going to fight, I'm just going to divide the baby in half, and you each get half. And the mother said no. That's how Solomon knew that, from the inside out. You know that if you ever relax when you're really mad at somebody, and listen a little bit that probably you'd work it out, but you don't want to yet. At the beginning that's just fine, but at some point that begins to hurt you too. And me too. Did you read this last week about the reporters that were arrested by the military? Their crime was wanting to talk to the Taliban. Wanting to establish connections with the Taliban. Now if you didn't know anything else about our foreign policy, you would know there was something amiss. What kind of country doesn't want the other side to even be heard? During WWII, they produced the writings of the Nazis, to say look at this, look at Mein Kampf, these people are crazy. What happens to a people that doesn't want to hear the other side? When did that happen? When did the land of the free, the home of the brave become so afraid that we don't even want people to listen to the other side?

This week another hard thing happened. A young man went to University of Texas with an automatic weapon, fired it in the air and then turned it on himself. I ask you a question, what do you think would have happened had he been Muslim? How would that story have spun had he been the type of person that many people consider to be our enemy? If Columbine had been people of Arab descent, or Muslim? Remember when Oklahoma City happened-- they first said it was a Muslim? Does anybody remember that little piece? Well, that's what happens when you have a good grudge, or a good prejudice, or a good hatred. Everything you do is an exception, a mistake; these things happen if it's happening from your side. If it happens from the other side, it's a great example of how bad they are. If a Palestinian falls into despair at having their house bulldozed, and puts bombs around them and goes into a restaurant and commits suicide, you say well, that's Islam. But then you can have a hundred Christians do the same thing in their own way and we don't ever think of those two things as in any way equivalent.

Love begins when we listen. I thought I was copying from Tillich when I chose that title, but what he said was, "the first duty of love is to listen." When I typed in and Googled *Love begins when we listen*, the only things that turned up were my own sermons. (laughter) So this may not be quite the universal teaching I thought it was going to be, and I didn't discover that until this morning. It seems really true to me that if we are going to love each other the only starting place is to listen. That's going to happen before you are going to like another person. It's going to happen before you heal. To listen to one another. How can we love one another if we can't even do that?

So the problem isn't how. We know that. The real question is why. The reason Jesus didn't tell us what to do is because that's not the problem. The problem isn't that we don't know what to do; the problem is confusion at a deeper level. We don't know who we are. We don't know what a human being is. We don't realize we are children of God. We don't realize that love is the most powerful thing within us. So, here's what he does. He tries to teach us that we cannot hate another person without wounding ourselves. When you are unhappy you have one view of what happiness is. When you are miserable, when you are wounded, you just think someone else hurting is enough for you to feel good. Genghis Khan, that great sage.... (laughter) I'm so glad I remembered this. This is his definition of happiness--and you'll figure out why Hallmark didn't use this in one of the cards.

The greatest happiness is to scatter your enemy, to drive him before you, to see his cities reduced to ashes, to see those who love him shrouded in tears and to gather into your bosom his wives and daughters.

Isn't that special? (laughter) Here's another one I didn't know he said.

I am the punishment of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you. (laughter)

So we didn't invent or take credit for that attitude. That goes way, way, way back. Might makes right. When you are hurting and wounded inside, just being stronger than anybody else feels good, and yet the suicide rate among the military is higher than I think it has ever been. Something is wrong. But as long as we can keep hatred going, we don't have to feel the wound in our own hearts. Courage then is to stop and to feel, and remember that when you have felt blissfully happy, the sermon on the mount came naturally to you. You may not have been thinking it was religious, but when you are blissfully happy, you are generous and kind, are you not? So what Jesus is talking about is a different view of happiness and he is not telling you to do something you don't want to do. He is telling you who you are. Great teachers don't tell you how, but I'm going to tell you how (laughter). See that's the great thing about being mediocre, I can do that. (laughter) Three vows and you'll never be angry again. (laughter) No, I'm kidding, but they can be very helpful in breaking the cycle of hatred.

Number One. **Make a vow to live in the present moment.** Have you ever noticed anger is in the present moment, and that's healthy sometimes, but are you are still mad about something that happened a year ago and at night you are still rehearsing it and every time you do it gets worse, you're enhancing it a little bit every time you tell the story? The brain is good at that. Maybe I should speak in first person. My brain can be good at that, just to keep telling the story over and over again and I get more and more pure and the other person gets more and more wicked. But I'm robbed of the present moment. So to come to the present moment, feel your toes. Wiggle them in your shoes. Wake up, look at the stars. Experience something beautiful now and it is harder for that gopher of hatred to keep digging the tunnels underneath your foundation.

Second, **Vow to live in the whole.** Let's say I've done something wrong to you, and you want to forgive me, but you can't because I'm a creep. If you wound me have you enriched the world or made it more dangerous? If we are having a fight and you win the debate, and I feel this big (thumb near forefinger), and I kind of crawl out the door, where's that going to end? Won't someone else pay for that conversation? If we wound each other and send each other out into the world, we haven't won anything. So living in the whole can remind you that one of the reasons I'm forgiving you and you're forgiving me has nothing to do with that one personal relationship. It's bigger than that.

The third thing is: **Resolve to live in your best self.** When you are in a deep grudge, you cannot remember what it's like to feel kindness, beauty, goodness. They are your natural state when you are at your best self, but hatred traps us and binds us to the worst feelings we have. They are poisonous feelings. They contaminate everything. Have you ever been awake in the night having a really good grudge and realized, you know that other person is probably sleeping real fine right now? The only thing this hatred is hurting is me. The only person being punished right now is me. The way Jesus said it is, "You are a child of God." It means you are emanating from a mystery you don't know and when you are kind, when you are loving, you express the very ground of your own being. You can't always live there. You will have your bad moments. There's a Chinese saying: *You cannot keep the birds of unhappiness from flying overhead, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.* (laughter) There are times when you will cave into unhappiness, but don't build your home there. Don't keep rehearsing old wounds. Come to the present, come to the whole, come to your best self, and you will feel yourself expressing that which is greatest within you. Martin Luther King said this notion of loving our enemies may be the hardest teaching that Jesus gave. I think it may also be the most important and most applicable, and most practical for redeeming our lives. What did Jesus mean? That we wish each other's happiness. It's not about me being angry or not angry with you, it's me not disconnecting from you and wishing the best for

you, and vice versa.

Why do we do that? We want to live in the present moment. We don't want to be a ghost living in the past. We want to live in the whole of things. We want to feel nature is our home, not be caught in a one-on-one grudge. Finally we want to live in the best of ourselves. Once we remember those three treasures that live in our hearts, then the how is easy. Well, it's simple. It's as simple as it is hard. Love begins when we listen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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