

Love Your Enemies

A Sermon Delivered by

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In the fifth chapter of the Gospel as recorded by St. Matthew, we find these arresting words flowing from the lips of Jesus, the Christ: "Ye have heard that it has been said, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy,' "but I say unto you, love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you; and pray for them that despitefully use you so that you can be the children of your father which is in Heaven." These are great words — words lifted to cosmic proportions. Over the centuries, men have looked upon this command as a pretty difficult one. They have gone so far as to say that the actual practice of this demand is not possible. They would say that this is just additional proof that Jesus was an impractical idealist who never quite came down to earth. But, far from being an impractical idealist, Jesus has become the practical realist, and the words in our text glitter in our eyes with new urgency. Far from being the pious injunction of an utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Love is the key to the solution of the problems which we confront in the world today — love, even for enemies.

I am sure that Jesus realized, when he uttered these words, that this was a very difficult command. He realized that it was hard, but he was not playing when he said it. We cannot dismiss these words as just another example of oriental hyperbole; we cannot say that Jesus was merely exaggerating to get over the point. He meant every word that he uttered. Jesus meant that we must love those persons who hate us. We must love those persons who seek to defeat us. We must love those persons who spitefully use us. He was not playing when he uttered these words. So, as Christians, we have the responsibility to seek to discover the meaning of these words and to see how we can live out this command in our every day lives. This command has meaning in our individual relationships and in our societal responses. So, let us begin in the practical realm by asking the question: How do we go about loving our enemies?

I

The first thing I would like to say at this point is that in order to love our enemies, we must begin by analyzing ourselves. It may be that the person or persons who hate you, hate you because of something you have unconsciously done to arouse that hate. So, begin by analyzing self. I realize that some people will hate you for no basic reason, for nothing that you have done. Some people just will not like the way you walk. Some people just will not like the way you talk. Some people will not like you because of the color of your skin. Some people will not like you because you can do your job better than they can do theirs. I realize all this, but over and above this, we must recognize the fact that some people may dislike you because of something that you have done unconsciously, deep down in the past, to arouse this hate response. Therefore, it is vitally necessary to look at self and see if there is something within that arouses the reaction.

This has a great deal of bearing on our international situation. We look at communism, and we look at Soviet Russia, and we tend to say in diplomatic circles that the Communists and the Russians are our enemies. Now, certainly, we cannot adopt the communistic way of life. We know that communism is based on the wrong premise, on an ethical relativism and a materialistic metaphysic that no Christian can accept. But, in the quiet hours of our national life we should pull down the shades and go into the rooms of our nation and realize that communism is existing and successful today because of some things that we have failed to do in

America in the Western nations. We have often taken necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. We have perpetuated colonialism and imperialism. We have trampled over our brothers and sisters with the iron feet of oppression. Let nobody fool you, the rhythmic beat and deep rumblings of discontent that we hear from the African and Asian continents are at bottom a revolt against the colonialism and imperialism perpetuated by Western civilization all these many years. In the quiet hours, men and women in Western civilization must realize that communism is here and successful because of some things that we failed to do. America, how is it that you see the "moat in your brother's eye" and fail to see the "beam in your own eye?" To put it in the Moffatt translation, how is it that you see the "splinter" in the eye of Russia and fail to see the "plank" in your own eye? So, if we are to love our enemies — our individual enemies, our national enemies — we must start by analyzing ourselves and seeing if there is something within our systems and within our individual lives that has brought about the hate response.

II

Secondly, in order to love our enemies, we must seek to discover the element of good within those persons that hate us. Whether we realize it or not, each of us is something of a schizophrenic personality. We are split up; we are divided against ourselves. There is something of a civil war going on within the being of every individual. Somehow the recalcitrant South of our souls is always warring against the North of our souls. That is, in this civil war that continually goes on, we are divided against ourselves. There is something within each of us that causes us to cry out with Ovid, "I see and approve the better things of life." There is something within all of us that causes us to cry out with Plato that the human personality is like a charioteer with two headstrong horses, each wanting to go in different directions. There is something within all of us that cries out with the Apostle Paul, "The good that I would I do not, and the evil that I would not, that I do." There is something within all of us that causes us to agree with Carlyle, "There are depths in man that would go down to the lowest hell and heights which reach the highest heaven — were not both heaven and hell made out of him — everlasting mystery and miracle that he is." Somehow the "isness" of our present nature is out of harmony with the eternal "oughtness" that ever confronts us. This simple means that there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we will begin to love all men. We will look

at the persons who hate us, we will look at the individual who hates us most, and at that very moment, we will see some good in them despite the fact that they are seeking to defeat us. When we pause and do this we can love men, because we see the image of God there, no matter how low they sink. When you pause for a moment and discover that center of goodness, that image of God within your brother or brothers who hate you, you begin to love them. And every time you think about hating them, think of the good in them, and you will love them more.

III

There is another thing that you must do to love your enemy. When the opportunity presents itself for you to defeat your enemy, and this opportunity will present itself sooner or later, you must not do it. For love in the final analysis means understanding creative good will to all men; it simply means that you will do nothing to defeat anybody. You work to defeat evil systems, but not individuals who are caught up in those evil systems. This is the meaning of love, and I believe this is what Jesus means when he says, "Love your enemies"; that you seek to defeat no individual; that you only seek to uplift him. The Greek language comes to our aid at this point. If you will notice, you will discover there are three words which mean "love." All of these have something to do with the word we use for love. Love at its best is not some affectionate thing. When I say to you, "Love your enemies," I am not talking about something affectionate. I am not talking about a sentimental something. That the concept can very easily end up a sentimental something is true, but then it can have no meaning. The Greek language comes to our aid to clarify this. For instance, the Greek language talks about *Eros*. *Eros* is a sort of aesthetic love. Plato talks about it a great deal in his dialogues as a sort of yearning of the soul for the realm of the gods. It has come to us to mean a sort of romantic love. It is a beautiful love. It has all of the beauty of poetry surrounding it. Edgar Allen Poe is talking about *Eros* in his beautiful "Annabelle Lee." He talks about a love that is greater than life itself, a love surrounded by the halo of eternity. Shakespeare is talking about *Eros* when he says, "Love is not love which alters when its alteration finds or bends with the remover to remove: Oh, no! it is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken; it is a star to every wandering bank." Now, that is *Eros*. It is beautiful and it is meaningful. The Greek language also gives us the word *Philia*, and this is a sort of intimate love between personal friends. This is the type of love that students have for

their rommates. It is a sort of reciprocal love. Here you love because you are loved. You love people who are likeable and people that like you.

The Greek language has still another word for love, *Agape*. *Agape* is more than *Eros*, it is more than an intimate affection between personal friends. *Agape* is a kind of understanding creative good will for all men. Theologians would say it is the love of God working in the lives of men. On this level you love men not because they are likeable, but because God loves them. You love them not because they are worthful to you, but because they are worthful to God. Here you love the individual who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. This is *Agape*, and I think that this is what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your enemies." And I am very happy that he did not say *like* your enemies. There are some people who are pretty difficult to like. There are many Southern politicians that I just do not like. I do not like what they are saying. I do not like what they are doing here in Washington in Congress. I do not like their attitudes. I do not like what they say about me and my people. But Jesus says, *love them*. Like is an affectionate sort of thing, but love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will; and this is what Jesus means when he says *love your enemies*. It is something greater than like. When we begin to do this, we have come to the creative meaning of Jesus' words, "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you."

IV

For a moment let us move from the practical "how" to the theoretical "why." Why should we love our enemies? The first reason is one which I think Jesus realized, hate does nothing but intensify the existence of hate and evil in the universe. Somewhere along the way of life somebody must have sense enough, somebody must be strong enough, to cut off the shame of hate. If I hit you and you hit back, and I hit you back and you hit me back, the process goes on ad-infinitum and ends up in defeat. Both of us are defeated through mutual destruction. Somewhere along the way somebody must be strong enough to stand up and refuse to hit back. The more we hate the more we intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Somewhere along the way of life somebody must have enough morality and enough religion and somebody must be strong enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil in the universe.

A few months ago my brother was driving me from Atlanta, Georgia to Chatanooga, Tennessee, and it was in the late evening. For some reason

the drivers were very discourteous that night. Hardly any of the drivers dimmed their lights as we drove along the highway. Finally, my brother got a little angry, and he said to me in no uncertain terms, "I know what I am going to do. The next person that comes along this highway and refuses to dim his lights, I am going to refuse to dim mine, and I am going to put them on with all of their power." I looked at him and said, "Wait a minute, don't do that. Somebody has got to have some sense on this highway, and if you don't dim your lights, there will be too much light and it will be destructive for all of us." My friends, it may be that Western civilization will end up destroyed on the highway of history because we failed to dim our lights with the great light of love at the right time. It may be that the nations of the world will end up in the junkheaps of destruction because they have not discovered the power of giving light in the midst of the glaring light of hate and evil. Somebody must have sense on the highway of life. Hate multiplies hate; force multiplies force; toughness multiplies toughness. It is all a descending spiral which ends up in destruction for everybody. So Jesus is right when he says "Love your enemies," because hate on any level does nothing but intensify the existence of hate and evil in the universe.

There is another reason why we should love our enemies, and this concerns the personality of the hate. We talk a great deal about what hate does to those individuals who are hated. We talk about it all over the South, and we talk about the Negro being the victim of the hate of reactionaries of the white South. We talk about what it does to the economic life of the Negro. We talk about what it does to his political life, but we often fail to see that it is injurious in another way; that hate in many instances does more to the hater than it does to the individuals hated. There is something about hate that tears down one's sense of values. It destroys objectivity. The person who hates is a psychological wreck. The person who hates is a pathological case. The person who hates somehow sees the ugly as beautiful and the beautiful as ugly. For the person who hates, the false becomes true and the true becomes false, the evil becomes good and the good becomes evil. He cannot see right, he cannot reason, he cannot move properly. Something has happened psychologically.

I remember reading, some years ago, an essay written by Professor E. Franklin Frazier, entitled, "The Pathology of Race Prejudice." In that essay Dr. Frazier gave an example of a white family in Virginia, I believe an aristocratic family of great wealth who had a beautiful mansion. It is said that a Negro woman who was a mulatto and had passed the realm of

visibility went to this mansion where the white lady invited her into the living room and had her take a seat on the finest sofa in the house. While she was there she talked with the lady and they had a very mutual fellowship. Then she left. A few days later this aristocratic white woman discovered that it had been a Negro who had come into her room. And when she discovered that, in a moment of emotional outburst she had the sofa burned up completely. Now, that is what hate does. Hate makes you pathological. Dr. Frazier goes on to say that many white persons in the deep South react very normally in their day-to-day relationships with other white persons, but the very minute they confront Negroes they lose all sense of objectivity and rationality. This is what happens when hate gets into one's system. The psychiatrists and the psychologists are saying this today. They tell us that the more you hate, the more you develop a sort of inner sense of guilt. You begin to push things deep down into the subconscious, and this creates many inner conflicts. It makes for the breaking forth of the libido; it makes for many things that destroy the very center of the personality. Yet we did not have to wait for modern psychology to say this. Long ago, another psychologist said it. He realized, as all the great psychologists of all the world have realized, that hate destroys the hater. Hate is like a cancer that gnaws away at the best of our lives. So, Jesus comes before us in our time saying once more, "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you"; for hate not only destroys the person that is hated, but it also destroys the hater.

Finally, love has within its very power a sort of redemptive agency, and so we should love our enemies because love is redemptive. Hate tears down and destroys. That is the purpose of hate. But love builds up, it creates and redeems. This is the basic reason why we should love our enemies. An individual may hate you, a race of people may hate you, but just keep on loving, and eventually through the power of your love, you will break them down.

People cannot stand love too long. There is something about love that is redemptive and creative. I think of one example in history that is quite vivid in my mind. When Abraham Lincoln ran for the presidency of the United States, there was a man who hated him. He went all over the country saying evil things about him; and wherever he could write, he wrote evil things about him, sometimes stooping to the lowest depths in his condemnation and criticism. He would go to the people and he would say, "You don't want this tall, lanky, ignorant man as your president." In

spite of all of this, Abraham Lincoln was finally elected President of the United States. One day, after being elected, it became his responsibility to choose his cabinet. He started choosing men here and there, and when he came to the post of Secretary of War, he looked around the country and discovered a man by the name of Stanton. He said to those surrounding him, "I choose Mr. Stanton as Secretary of War." The men looked at Mr. Lincoln and said, "Are you a fool? Do you know that this man has said evil things about you?" Mr. Lincoln replied, "Yes, I have read a statement. I heard many of the things he said, but as I look across the nation, I find that he is the best man for the job." So, he chose Mr. Stanton as Secretary of War. When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated many great things were said about him, but one of the finest statements was made by this same Mr. Stanton. He stood before Abraham Lincoln's bier and remembered the greatness of him and said, "He now belongs to the ages." Suppose Mr. Lincoln and hated Mr. Stanton? Suppose he had retaliated with hate? Stanton would have gone to his grave hating Lincoln, and Lincoln would have gone to his grave hating Stanton. But through the power of love, Lincoln ended up transforming and redeeming Mr. Stanton. There is something about love that is redemptive and creative and transforming.

V

I cannot close this morning in the midst of this great experience that you have had here discussing "non-violence and social change" without mentioning the implications of this doctrine of love in the area of race relations. I am convinced that if oppressed people are to break loose from their oppression honorably, they must use the weapon of love and non-violence. There are three ways that oppressed people can break away from their oppression. One is to use the all-too-prevalent method of physical violence and corroding hatred. Some people have gained their freedom through violence, the thing about violence is that it only gains a temporary victory, it never gains ultimate peace. The weakness of violence is its futility. It creates many more social problems than it solves. There is still a voice crying through the vistas of time saying to every potential Peter, "Put up the sword". History is cultered with the wreckage of nations that failed to follow this command. As I have said on so many occasions; if the Negro and the people of the world breaking loose from colonialism succumb to the temptation of using violence in their struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of

bitterness, and their chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. Violence is not the way.

There is another way: just to accept the plight, to resign, to acquiesce. A lot of people have tried to deal with the problem of oppression by doing that. Sometimes they start out for the Promised Land, and they confront the difficulties of the wilderness, and they cry out to Moses, "Take us back to Egypt. We would prefer the flesh pots of Egypt to the difficulties that we encounter in trying to get to the Promised Land." But this is not the way. We must come to see that the minute we passably accept injustice, we co-operate with it. When we co-operate with injustices, we are just as evil as the individuals inflicting the injustice. Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is co-operation with good. Resignation is not the way.

There is a third method. It is open to us, and God grant that we would use it. It is the method of non-violent resistance rooted in the philosophy of Christian love; and I think, my friends, that this is the most powerful weapon available to the Negro and available to the subjects of colonialism as they struggle for freedom. We must stand up with organized mass non-violent action, refusing to co-operate with evil, refusing to co-operate with segregation, and at the same time having love in our hearts. We must somehow say to our brothers in the South, "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will match your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you. Yet, we will not obey your evil laws. Do what you want. Bomb our homes; threaten the lives of our children; and will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators into our communities late at night and take us on the side of some desolate road and leave us there, and we will still love you. Run all over the country and indulge in hate campaigns and propaganda campaigns, and make it appear that we are not prepared culturally or intellectually or morally for integration, and yet we will still love you. At the same time, we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. Yes, in winning our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory. We will win our freedom and at the sametime win the hearts of those who have deprived us of our freedom!"

This is the challenge which stands before us. As we go out into life to struggle for justice and freedom, love is the only way. The great military genius, Napoleon, stood up one day, and as he looked back across the years

he said these words, "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have built great empires, but upon what did they depend? They depended upon force, but long ago, Jesus started an empire that depended on love, and even to this day, millions will die for him." There is a great deal of truth in that. It seems that I can see the lowly Nazarene walking around the streets and villages of Galilee. He lived amid the days of the Roman Empire, and he looked at the Roman Empire with all of her intricate and fascinating military machinery and said to himself, "I am not going to use this method. I am not going to use this way. I am just going to use love as my ammunition, and I am going out and put on the breast-plate of righteousness and the whole armour of God and just start marching."

And I say to you that that army is still marching! It has grown from a group of twelve men to more than seven hundred million today. As a result of that love-philosophy, Jesus was able to split history into A.D. and B.C. He was able through this love to shake the hinges from the gates of the Roman Empire. And so today, we can hear the glad echo of Heaven saying, "Jesus shall reign wherever the sun does its successive journeys run. His kingdom spread from shore to shore 'til moons shall wane and wax no more." We are still marching. There is a little tree planted on a little hill that we call Calvary. On that tree we see hanging the world's most influential character. Never forget. That scene on Calvary is more than a meaningless drama that took place on a stage of history. It is a telescope through which we look out into the long vistas of eternity and see the love of God breaking forth into time. It is a reminder to a power-drunk generation, to a generation depending on nuclear and atomic energy. Love is the only way. It is a reminder to an age in transition, to a nation in transition, to a world in revolution, that love is the only way.

Go out with that assurance, with that faith, that with the spirit of Jesus in the philosophy of love, in the method of non-violence, we can turn history upside down and new worlds will flow into being. This is the meaning of Jesus' words. God grant that America and all of the nations of the world will discover these words. I am told, by paraphrasing the words of John Oxenham that, "To every nation there openeth a way and ways and a way. The high nation climbs the highway and the low nation takes the low, and in between on the misty flats the rest drift to and fro. But to every nation there openeth a high and a low way — every nation decideth which way its soul shall go." God grant that we in America and other nations of the world will choose the highway: a way in which

men will be able to live together as brothers; a way in which men will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality; a way in which men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning-hooks; a way in which men will begin to live out the courageous faith of our nation that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; a way in which men will love mercy, do justly, and walk humbly with God; a way in which men will somehow begin to live out the words of Jesus by loving their enemies, blessing those persons and praying for those persons that spitefully use us. Then, our generation will be able to matriculate in the university of eternal life!

Oh God, our gracious Heavenly Father, help us to realize the meaning and the power of love as we confront all of the experiences of life. Give us that love found in the life of Jesus. Help us to be courageous in it. Help us to apply it in all of our social problems, and grant that we will build right here a great world where all men will live together as brothers. Amen.



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