

"LOVE YOUR ENEMIES"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
February 19, 1995

INTRODUCTION

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"What is so unusual about our Guest of Honor this evening is that in a profession that is most competitive...where the pressure to make it big is so intense that often friends turn on one another...George Burns does not have a single enemy". The speaker paused for a moment and then added, "They all have died!"

DEVELOPMENT

And Jesus said,

"Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you."

(Luke 6: 27, 28)

Let me work into this sermon by lifting up a question right here at the beginning: who are your enemies? Now, some of you may be saying, "I really don't have any enemies". You may be like the little girl who wrote a note to her pastor saying,

"Dear Pastor,

Last Sunday in talking to us I heard you say to love your enemies. I am only six and do not have any yet....but I hope to have some when I am seven years of age.

Love,
Jennifer"

That may be your attitude. "I really don't have any enemies. I love everybody and as far as I know, everybody loves me". Maybe so. Or, maybe we need to stretch our view of who an "enemy" may be. Could someone in your family be an enemy? A sister-in-law, perhaps, or even a parent? Or, someone with whom you work. Or, perhaps it's someone with whom you're in competition. Think about it.

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Now, competitors may become enemies. Not just in business, but within the same family. Brothers compete. Sisters compete. Yes, spouses compete. Friends and neighbors compete. And I suppose there's nothing wrong with that, but feelings so easily can be rubbed raw. Resentments can build. And before you know it, a neighbor is secretly glad to see another neighbor's misfortune.

Back to the question with which we started: who then is your enemy? There may be a person or persons perhaps whom we secretly harbor ill feelings toward that we have never thought to classify under Jesus' definition of enemy. But in a sense they are enemies. They're persons for whom we have ill feelings, or they are persons who harbor ill feelings toward us. And it's true, too, that some enemies may arise because we try to do the right thing, because we say the right thing.

You may have heard about the minister who was becoming more and more concerned about some unsavory businesses that had opened near a school. His protests led eventually to a court hearing and the defense attorney did all that he could do to embarrass this well-intentioned minister. The lawyer asked,

"Are you not a pastor?" "And doesn't the word pastor mean 'shepherd'?" To this definition the minister agreed and nodded his head "yes". "Well, sir....if you are a shepherd, why aren't you out taking care of the sheep?" To which the pastor replied, "Because today, sir....I'm fighting the wolves!"

There are wolves out there. You and I know this and we also know that some enemies need to be made. If there are persons who are hurting others and you find yourself in a position to slow them down or to stop them, then that is an enemy you need to make. Notice that Jesus was not saying, "Do not have enemies". And I think that anyone who tries to do anything of significance in this world is going to have some enemies. What about Mother Teresa or what about Billy Graham...as respected as they are...I'm sure they both have enemies.

Who then are your enemies? It could be someone who is tempting you to do something wrong. Or, your enemy may be someone who has hurt you in the past and that hurt lingers and will not go away. Your enemy could be someone with whom you disagree strongly on some issue, but that disagreement has caused a rift, a barrier to be put up between the two of you. So this is the first question we need to ask ourselves this morning: who is your enemy?

IS YOUR ENEMY AFFECTING YOU SPIRITUALLY?

And then to that question let me add a second question: how is your enemy affecting you spiritually? And the chances are that he or she is.

There are several ways that one can respond to an enemy. First of all, you can retaliate. Remember the story about the man who was informed by his doctor that he had rabies. Unfortunately this man had waited so long before going to see his doctor that there was nothing the doctor could do to help him. After telling the man the bad and saw news, the doctor departed. He came back at a later time to see how the man was getting along and he found him writing something

on a piece of paper. The doctor asked him if he was writing a will. "No" said the man with rabies,

"I'm making a list of all the people I'm going to bite".

Which reminds me of another dog-related story. Back when I was in my teens, I worked as a paper-boy...delivering about 250 papers six nights a week in the hilly part of my hometown. Good exercise, but there were a number of dogs that had to be carefully dealt with. One of the other paper boys in town had been severely nipped by a dog on his route and he had reported it to the local Humane Society which proceeded to take the animal in for observation, kept it for a few days and then released it to the owner. The owner was not happy over it. It even made the papers. The owner never forgot that incident. For ten years she continued to torment that former newsboy, first, with phone calls and then damaging gossip.

Our papers carry stories all the time of people who have a grievance against someone else and they have tried to settle that grievance through some form of retaliation. Spiritually, retaliation is deadly. There was a television program some time back that pointed out how deadly it is. It was about a young man who had a "love-hate" relationships with his father. He was trying desperately to hurt his father in a business deal. And when his mother learned about it she chastised him. He responded saying,

"Mom....I just wanted to beat him once." And she replied,
"You haven't beaten him....you have become him."

Retaliation does permanent damage not only to our enemy, but to us as well. We become different people...twisted and evil and mean. But that's only one way of dealing with an enemy. Retaliation.

Moving on. Another way is to secretly harbor resentment toward that persons. And here I think we are going closer to home and to where we may be. This is one of the most common spiritual problems among Christian folk. We're nice people. We wouldn't openly harm anyone, but...oh boy...are we ever good at bearing a grudge. The problem with harboring negative feelings toward someone else is, again, what those feelings do to us. Do you follow me?

Here's a story that's worth sharing. Back in 1844 Captain Robert Stockton brought his ship, the Princeton, to our nation's capital to show her off before government officials and leading social figures. And while his ship was something of a technological marvel and her firepower vast, Stockton was really proudest of one particular gun. It was a gun called, The Peacemaker. It was the biggest and the heaviest naval cannon then in existence. The Peacemaker. It weighed 13½ tons. It fired cannon balls that were a foot in diameter. A cannon ball weighed 255 pounds. This gun - The Peacemaker - could shoot a cannon ball several miles with a normal 25 pound charge of gunpowder and the gun had even been tested with up to a 50 pound charge. What power.

During the celebration on the Princeton, Captain Stockton fired his gun repeatedly for a crowd made up of the President and his cabinet and several Senators and influential dignitaries. While festivities were in full swing down below, Stockton was summoned to fire the gun one more time. Most of the cabinet and the Senators present stayed below. President Tyler started to come up and then changed his mind to stay below to hear his son-in-law finish a song.

When Stockton fired the gun, it exploded, killing two members of the President's cabinet and a number of influential citizens. And had that explosion occurred at any point earlier that afternoon, the gun probably would have removed the better part of the United States government. This gun - The Peacemaker - that was to be an amazing terror to an enemy proved to be an explosive terror to friends. Retaliation and resentment are both explosive terrors to the one carrying them. We need to remember that. Grudges don't heal by nursing them. There's a better way to deal with them.

WE CAN LOVE OUR ENEMIES

Jesus is telling us of still another way to deal with an enemy. We can try to love them. And sometimes, friends...for our own sake, that is the only way we can deal with an enemy. And before we can love them, we have to learn to forgive them.

When Kenneth Godfrey of Locust Grove, Georgia was eighteen years old, his father died. All of his adult life his dad had owned and operated a service station and people purchased items mostly on credit. After his father died, he and his mother tried to run the service station. She'd run it mornings and early afternoons and then when he got home from school, he'd run it until closing time around nine o'clock. He became aware of a large file of debts that had accumulated across the years. And even since his father's death, people were still refusing to pay what they owed. It was as if his death had cancelled their debt, which, of course, it hadn't, but this bothered the son, Ken. After about a year and a half, Kenneth and his mother sold the service station and got out of the business. They kept that file of debts, in hope that those who owed them would someday come by and pay up.

Another year went by and one Sunday afternoon, Ken's mother walked into his room with the file of debts in her hands and said to her son,

"Son...there's something that is eating at me about these debts and I've decided to do something about them...."

Kenneth thought to himself..."we're finally going to get a lawyer?" He asked his mother what she planned to do and she said,

"I'm going to forgive them." Ken asked, "And how are you going to do that?" She said, "Follow me and I'll show you...."

Well, they went out into their backyard and gathered some sticks and made a fire on an old cook-out grill. Then she opened the file of debts, took one out, read their name out loud, tore the debt in half and said, "I forgive you" and with that dropped it onto the fire. Ken looked amazed. She looked at her son and said, "Do you want to try it?" Ken said, "No...I don't think I can." His mother said,

"Son....you don't have a choice about it. If you want to be forgiven...you must forgive them...."

Kenneth stood there in silence, watching her burn those debts. Finally, he slowly reached into the file and took one out, read the name out loud, tore it into small pieces and dropped it on the fire. It took him about 20 minutes to complete the task, but when it was finished, it was as if a heavy burden had been lifted. As he forgave, he, too, was forgiven. Later on he said this of this experience,

"Because of this demonstration in forgiveness that phrase in the Lord's Prayer....'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...' has taken on a whole new meaning...."

Forgiving someone who has hurt you, offended you...this is the first step that one takes toward loving them. You may say,

"What he or she did to me is just too horrible....it's just unthinkable....I'll never be able to forgive them....."

Try to remember Jesus on the cross, breathing words of forgiveness. And ask yourself, who is your anger, your resentment hurting most of all? My guess is that it's worse on you than it is on your enemy. So, why not begin with a clean slate...from this day forward. Clear the decks and make a fresh start today.

PRAYER Once again remind each of us, O God, of how You have revealed in Jesus a new spiritual power that can heal broken relationships and overcome even the most stalwart enemies we may have...if only we give it a try. Open our eyes that we may know and understand Him better, and stir our hearts that we may admire Him as we try to work out in this troubled and tangled world of ours this whole question of overcoming animosity and hostility and violence. Help us to grow in our understanding of what it means to forgive and to forget - forever. We ask this, O God, in all humility, knowing the limitation and the inadequacy of our thinking as well as the weakness of our wills. In His name we pray. Amen.

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"Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, and bless those who curse you and PRAY for those who abuse you"

PRAYER

Once again remind each of us, O God, of how You have revealed in Jesus a new spiritual power that can heal broken relationships and overcome even the most stalwart enemies we may have...if only we give it a try. Open our eyes that we may know and understand Him better, and stir our hearts that we may admire Him as we try to work out in this troubled and tangled world of ours this whole question of overcoming animosity and hostility and violence. Help us to grow in our understanding of what it means to forgive and to forget - forever. We ask this, O God, in all humility, knowing the limitation and the inadequacy of our thinking as well as the weakness of our wills. In His name we pray. Amen.