

Love Your Neighbor as You Love Yourself

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

I want to focus this morning on Romans 13:9 – where Paul (who's writing to Christians being persecuted in Rome) says, "*Love your neighbor as yourself – for love does no wrong*" - but before I do that I want to have you think about something...

Some of you may remember a short story titled, 'The Sunflower' ... it's a story written by a Jewish writer, named Simon Isenthall, who shares an experience that he had while being incarcerated in a German concentration camp...

According to his story, he was doing his daily duties when a young German nurse stopped him and said, "*Come quickly!*" - leading him to meet a badly injured German soldier who's head was wrapped in a *blood soaked bandage* (that covered both of his eyes)... Grabbing Isenthall's hand - the dying soldier said, "*I must speak to a Jew before I die*"...

The soldier went on to tell Isenthall how he (and his SS soldiers) were burning down a house (when all of a sudden an entire Jewish family ran out of it - to escape)... but on command, the soldier (and all of his comrades) prevented the family from getting away (and shot and killed each one of them instead)...

Realizing that his own time on earth was limited – and that he was about to die - the soldier grasped Isenthall's hand (as hard as he could) and begged for mercy – saying, "*Before I die – would you – a Jew – please forgive me for what I've done?*"...

So disgusted by what he had heard from the dying soldier Isenthall says that he jerked his hand away from the man and ran out of the room – denying him the mercy he so desperately wanted...

And in the rest of that story, Isenthall struggles with a very haunting question – "*Should I have forgiven him?*" and he goes around asking other Jews that same question – should he have granted the dying soldier the mercy of forgiveness (or was it better to let him die in his own personal Hell)?...

So, here's my question gang – what would you have done (as a person of faith)?... love your neighbor (so that he could die in peace) – or would you have let the man suffer in his own torment and regret?... What would you have done?...

Those are some of the questions that ethicists sit around discussing... they're questions that abused children sometimes find themselves being confronted with later on in life... and they're questions that every Christian who takes God's Word to heart must also wrestle with when they try to digest our Second Reading (this morning) from Romans 13:9 – where Paul was saying (to persecuted Christians), “*Love your neighbor as you love yourself “... for love does no wrong”*... which we also hear Jesus saying in Matthew 7:12, “*Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you*”...also known as the Golden Rule...

But I guess the even bigger question is – but what if you don't love your neighbor as yourself – and instead, you hurt them the way they hurt you?... I mean, in some ways it's more satisfying to see them suffer... and does God really keep score if you get even (rather than show mercy)?...

PJS Well, a few years ago I had to really think about those questions for myself... and without getting into all of the details of my story let me simply tell you that I stumbled upon a person who I was having a very difficult time liking –let alone loving (we were just oil and vinegar)... and I'm not sure if it's helpful at this point to play the blame game (but what I can tell you is that *I wasn't having holy thoughts at the time*)...

In fact, I remember someone telling me, “Why don't you try praying for them?”... And I said, “Because it's not working!”...

And they said, “Well, how do you know your prayers aren't working?”...

And I said, “Because they're still breathing!”... (Yeah – it was bad)... I was really struggling to “love my neighbor”...

But it was at that low point that I realized something very interesting... that when you hold onto a grudge – and you wish harm on someone else – and you seek revenge rather than healing - (you're not necessarily hurting your neighbor) but you are hurting yourself (most of all)... injuring your own goodness... and the peace that you have with God – (which – once lost – affects every aspect of your life)....

How?...

Because anger leads to ugliness – and ugliness takes away joy – and when your joy is lost (not only has the other person won – but you've also allowed that poison to infect you)...which is why there's a lot of truth to the saying – that it “*takes a*

3

strong person to love their neighbor, but it takes a godly person to love and forgive” ...

Is it easy to do?... Is it easy forgiving people (and loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves)?... I haven't found it to be... but is it any easier carrying the burden of hatred, anger, resentment, and bitterness around for the rest of your life?...

You tell me...

And as you think about it also remember the words of Psalm 37:8 - *Do not allow anger to take rest in your heart but turn away from all revenge – for it only leads to your own demise... but for those who heed His Word and follow His commands - they will find themselves rich beyond measure” ...* which, by the way, are not my words – but the promise of God... that when we turn towards peace (peace also finds its way into our lives)...

Let me close with a story of how a woman (I met a few years ago) showed me how that is true... and I will give you the abbreviated version (but she said to me that she married when she was quite young) – (to a man who treated her poorly) – and was verbally and physically abusive not only to her but also to their two sons... and proceeded to cause her all sorts of grief... he just wasn't a good guy...

And this woman said that when all of this first happened she was so angry that the man that she thought she knew (would turn out to be so different)... but rather than let it get the best of her she went back to school, got a good job, and eventually had a very lucrative career (that afforded her a great lifestyle)...

But she said that she never quite got over that divorce... in fact, she couldn't say that she hated men but she definitely didn't trust them... and she may have dated a few men here and there (but found *that anger that she continued to carry for her husband* was always getting in the way of moving on with her life)... and in time it led her to feeling empty and alone... yes she had a good job (but a life that she didn't want)...

To keep a long story short – she got more involved in her church and decided to join that congregation on a missionary trip to the area around Kosovo (which, as you know, was where terrible fighting took place in the 1990's)...

And she said that when she arrived it wasn't long after the war... and everything was a disaster... people were living in homes that were falling apart – food was

scarce – children were often seen running around without shoes on... and she said that she never saw such poverty... and at first she said she felt sorry for them (because they seemed as if they had nothing)...

And while over there she befriended a woman in that village who lost so much – both of her sons and her husband had been killed – her daughter had been raped – and she had nothing but the clothes on her back...

and the woman I was talking to asked this poor woman what she wanted to pray for... and the poor woman said, *“Pray for those who have done this to me... pray that they find a better way to live... pray that they find peace”*...

and she said that when she heard the woman’s prayer request she started to cry... because in hearing what this woman wanted prayer for (and thinking about how unable she was to move on from her own pain) she said, *“And the irony of that moment was in realizing how incredibly rich this woman was – rich in spirit – rich in the things of God – rich in love - and she has become the woman I’ve wanted to become (ever since that day)... because when you can love those who have hurt you”* she said, ***“your eyes and your heart - become the eyes and the heart of God”***...

Friends, the Bible tells us that we should “love our neighbor as we love ourselves” (and I don’t think it says that to make us friendly people)... I think it reminds us to love all people (even those who don’t deserve it) because in doing so we not only share God’s love (but we let also God - live within in us) in a world (that so desperately needs him)...

May God use us all as instruments of His love, May His peace be made known in our hearts, and may we all walk as Children of the Light...

In Jesus’ name we pray...

Amen!

Thinking about all the troubles in the world right now (and all the suffering that we come across day after day in our news feeds) I remembered a poem that helps me remember where to look for answers. It says, "When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world.

I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation.

When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family.

Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself."