

Sermon for Sunday, February 17, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE GREATEST THING AMONG MEN"

Ephesians 4:25-32

Text: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Ephesians 4:31, 32

This morning I want to talk about getting along with others. During these past weeks I have been discovering in a fresh, new way some things that I have known with my mind for a long time. Now I am discovering them with my heart. One of the things that has been brought home to me very vividly is the fact that the most important thing among men is our relationship to others. In time of crisis and trouble, we need the support and love of someone we can lean on. And in times of happiness and well-being, we need someone to share our love with.

During the past two weeks I have been on a vacation alone. It was necessary, I suppose, to break my routine, my habit patterns for a time. With the death of Elizabeth my physical energies had been exhausted and my emotional elasticity was gone. Yet, I discovered a number of things that I want to share with you this morning.

First, I discovered that being alone is a terrible experience. One can be surrounded by any number of people, but if there is no one who belongs to you and you to that person, you can be most lonely indeed. I also discovered that the value of experiences--of seeing things, of doing things--lies most of all in having someone to share them with. Many of the places I might have gone and many of the things I might have done I did not do simply because there was little enjoyment in them if they were unshared. In this process it was brought home to me how really unimportant and insignificant "things" are. During the time I was gone I went to some lovely places and enjoyed some nice facilities. But I would have much rather been almost any place in the world if it could have been with someone I loved and who loved me in return. This is just another way of saying that material things are not the most important things in life. Some people seem to think they are. Some of us get such a fixation on having and acquiring and getting that we spend our whole lives for them. Let me assure you that it simply isn't worth it.

I don't mean to imply that "things" are not nice to have or that they have no importance at all. I am saying that at most they come in a poor second to our relationship to another. So, the most important thing among men is our relationship to persons--to those we love the most, to our family and our friends. Material things, worldly goods, are nice window dressing to have. But you can have them without a deep, loving personal relationship to someone and you have very little. On the other hand, you can have such a personal relationship and the fact that you may have little of the things of the world will be relatively unimportant.

Yet, if the most important thing among men is our relationship to one another, why is it that so many of those relationships are being destroyed today? Take marriages, for example. We are told that the divorce rate is climbing at an incredible rate. Why are our homes, our marriages, under such crisis? What is wrong that this closest of relationships are being broken up. Well, there are a lot of secondary reasons--such as the anxiety in our world over various crises such as war, fuel, food, pollution and so on. These anxieties spill over into our home life and create tensions. But the basic reason for the breakdown in many relationships today is that we have gotten away from some basic and fundamental rules that the Bible lays down. I want to share with you one of the fundamentals of interpersonal relationships that the Bible talks about and it is our text for this morning.

First of all notice verse 31. St. Paul writes, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice." Now, those are strong words describing strong emotions....bitterness....wrath....anger....malice. Now, the fact is, all of us experience these emotions in varying degrees of intensity. We get our feelings hurt, someone does something to us or fails to do something we think they should and suddenly we find ourselves racked by those kinds of emotions. And the question is, what do we do with those emotions?

Well, St. Paul gives us the answer to that question. He tells us to "put away from you...." Notice carefully those words. If you put something away from you it implies that it has been with you or in you. If you stop to think about it, when you are hurt or angry at someone, don't you find yourself having an imaginary scene in your mind where you confront the person and really fix him good? Don't you imagine little scenes where you say some biting, cutting thing with just the right amount of sarcasm? How many times have you gone to bed only to lie awake grinding your teeth over some injustice, some anger, some deed that someone has done to you? And the reason I know you do that is because I do it too!

So, St. Paul says to put those emotions away from us. But how does one do that? I once had a couple come to me who were in the process of divorce. For 21 years he had been storing up grievances against his wife. Many of them she could no longer even remember, but he had stored them up in his heart and had gone over them time and time again. Finally, when his heart was full of bitterness and wrath and anger he dumped them all on her at once and said, "Look what you have done to me." Now, the Bible says that if a man has anything against his brother to go and tell him. To get rid of those bad emotions you need to let the other person know. He may not have intended it the way you took it; he may not have realized how you felt; or there may have been some other reason in his life that you were entirely unaware of.

When I counsel with young couples getting married one of the things I tell them are the rules for fighting. One day soon I'll share them with all of you. But one of the rules is that you must always fight when you are angry. Get rid of that hostility--ventilate that emotion--under controlled circumstances. And the reason I tell them to always fight when they are angry is so that they can put it away from them, so that they don't store it up in their hearts. I don't want to see any more hearts filled with 21 years of garbage dumped on a marriage.

So, to keep your personal relationships to the ones you love intact, first of all you must put certain things out of your life, out of your heart. St. Paul says to put away from us these bad emotions. Now, the second thing St. Paul says for us to do is to put some other things in our hearts. He writes, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Are you kind? All the time? Are you tenderhearted--always? Are you a forgiving person? Don't answer for yourself--ask your wife or your husband or your children. They will know better than you.

But how does one become kind, tenderhearted and forgiving? You see, these emotions do not come naturally to us. These are spiritual qualities and by nature we are not spiritual. The Bible tells us that these emotions are the fruit of the Spirit. St. Paul writes, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness...." (Gal. 5:22)

It comes down to this: If you want to have those spiritual qualities that enable you to have healthy, wholesome relationships with others, you have to have Jesus. It is as simple as that. You can have those needed emotions that enable you to relate to others if you have Jesus. Let me illustrate. The divorce rate today is three out of five. For every five marriages three are ending in divorce and the

percentage is still climbing. But for couples who are active in a church, the rate drops to one out of twenty. Now, one out of twenty is far too high but the simple fact is that when a couple is worshipping the Lord and serving him together in his church, their chances of a successful marriage are vastly improved.

My sermon this morning is entitled, "The Greatest Thing Among Men". That was a deliberate choice. I did not say "the greatest thing in life". No, the greatest thing in life is to have a personal relationship to Jesus. When you have Jesus, you have the fruits of the Spirit in your life and those are the qualities you must have to relate to one another. Take, for example, this thing of tenderheartedness. The Bible tells us that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for the last time. He knew very well what lay before him--the rejection, the humiliation, and ultimately the crucifixion. Yet, the Bible tells us that as he approached the city he stood on a hilltop and looked at Jerusalem spread out below him. And the Bible says he wept. He still loved and cared for those who would abuse him so. Such tenderheartedness in our lives can only come from him. Or look at this thing of forgiveness. Sometimes the only way to heal a relationship is for forgiveness to occur. In your mind's eye can you see the dying Jesus, twisting in agony upon that cruel cross of pain, and then lifting his eyes to heaven saying, "Father, forgive them...."?

Yes, the greatest thing in life is to have a personal relationship to Jesus. When you have that you will begin to discover in your life the fruits of the Spirit such as kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness. And when you have those spiritual attributes you will discover that healing is occurring in your relationships to others. You will be able to put out of your heart bitterness and wrath and anger. You will discover flowing from your heart the qualities of Jesus--kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness--the kind of forgiveness that we saw on the cross when God in Christ forgave us.

Do you have those spiritual qualities this morning that enable you to relate well in a deeply personal way to those closest to you? If you do not, apart from Jesus I do not know where you will get them.