

Sermon for Sunday, January 16, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Senior Pastor
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"AN I FOR AN I"

Ephesians 4:17-32

Text: "...and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as
God in Christ forgave you." --Ephesians 4:32

Over in the fifth chapter of St. Matthew the sermon on the mount is recorded. In that discourse Jesus makes this statement, "You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." He goes on to add, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."

So right in the beginning of the New Testament, Jesus lays down a startling new principle. Up until this point justice in human relationships has demanded a tooth for a tooth--an eye for an eye. But Jesus says that this old principle is no longer valid. And he lays down a new principle--the principle of an I (personal pronoun) for an I (personal pronoun). When we use the word "I" we mean something very specific. An "I" is a person, a human being. An "I" is a feeling being, a real somebody, a person. An "I" is not an object or a thing. An "I" is never to be used or abused, never to be ignored, never to be manipulated and exploited, never to be treated as anything less than a person or worth, a person of value, a person who is important.

So, Jesus lays down a startling new principle--the principle that an "I"--an individual, a person--shall be for every other "I", he shall be for every other person as someone of significance, as someone of worth. And as a matter of fact, the rest of his life Jesus spent spelling out just what that meant. For example, a certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves. They beat him, robbed him, and left him for dead. A priest came by but looked upon the poor man as an object, a thing, and passed by on the other side. Then a Levite came along and he, too, saw the robbed man as a thing instead of a human being, instead of a person of worth. So he passed by on the other side of the road as well. But then a Samaritan came along and saw that poor, bleeding object lying in the ditch by the side of the road. But the Samaritan saw him as a person, as someone of worth, of importance, of significance. Indeed, he saw another "I". He fulfilled the command of Jesus, the new principle he had laid down, for he became an "I for an I". He reached out to that other person, he was for him--and he ministered to him.

As a pastor I am called upon to counsel with people who are experiencing a brokenness in their relationships to others--sometimes it is a wife or a husband, sometimes it is a child or a parent, sometimes it is a business associate. In almost every case the difficulty is at base the problem of one person treating another person as something less than a person. A husband may be treating his wife as an extension of his own personality and ignores her as a person in her own right, a person of worth. Or it may be that a parent is treating a child as an object--literally, as a thing--rather than as a person with feelings and emotions and needs of his own.

A Christian psychologist has recently written about the impact on a child's sense of self-worth when he is treated something less than an "I", something less than a person of worth. He writes, "little children typically suffer a severe loss of status during the tender years of childhood. Much of the rebellion, discontent, and hostility of the teenage years emanates from overwhelming, uncontrollable feelings of inferiority and inadequacy." But he goes on to say something about older people, too, who lose their sense of worth as persons. "And I am convinced," he writes,

"that senility and mental deterioration at the end of life often result from the growing awareness by the aged that they live in the exclusive world of the young, where wrinkles, backaches, and dentures are matters of scorn; where their ideas are out-of-date and their continued existence is a burden" (James Dobson in Hide or Seek, page 11).

so Jesus lays down a startling new principle. He says that my relationship to you shall always be "an I for an I." He says that I as a person must always relate to you as another person of worth, as a fellow human being with feelings and emotions and needs that demand my care, my compassion, my concern.

In our scripture for this morning St. Paul talks about the new principle of Jesus. He is writing to a group of Christians at Ephesus and he tells them about an I for an I. He writes, "...and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Now, the first thing I want to call to your attention is who these people were. You know, sometimes we get the impression that the people the New Testament talks about were all Saints--that they were all perfect people. But St. Paul says to the Ephesians, "putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth to his neighbor." So the Ephesian church had some liars in it. He wrote, "Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." So, the church had some hotheads in it. St. Paul said, "Let the thief no longer steal." So the congregation had some thieves in it! He wrote, "let no evil talk come out of your mouth." So they had some foul-mouthed gossips in the congregation. So here is St. Paul writing to some lying, hot-headed, stealing, bad-mouthers and telling them to practice the Jesus principle of an I for an I. So these New Testament saints don't sound any different from us, do they?

The second thing I want to call to your attention is this: only when you yourself are in a forgiven relationship to God can you practice the Jesus principle. Look at our text for this morning. St. Paul says they can practice an I for an I, that they can be kind and tenderhearted and forgiven because God in Christ has forgiven them. Do you remember our Scripture for this morning? St. Paul wrote, "put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life..." And then he says, "And put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." So you can't practice the Jesus principle unless you are a Christian. That means that if there is a brokenness in your life between you and someone else--between man and wife, between parent and child, between neighbor and neighbor, the first thing we have to do is to examine our own relationship to God.

Now, there is a very simple reason for why this is so. When I am in a right relationship to God, then I know that I am loved and cherished; I know that I am cared for, that I am forgiven. I have a tremendous sense of self-worth because God loves me. I have a sense of being a real person of value because I know Jesus has died for me. And when I know that, you can't take it away from me. You may ignore me, treat me badly, treat me as an object or a thing. You may try to destroy me by manipulating me or using me or even abusing me, but you cannot destroy my sense of worth; you cannot destroy my sense of value as a human being--I know I am loved, I know I am cherished, I know what I am somebody whom God loves.

Does that make sense to you? I don't respond to you because of how you treat me. I am not dependent on you for my own sense of self-worth, my own sense of self-esteem. No, when I am in right relationship to God I already have that. Therefore I am free to respond to you--not based on how you treat me--but I am free to respond on the basis of the Jesus principle, an I for an I.

So first St. Paul calls on sinners like you and me to practice the Jesus principle, but second the only people who can do it are people who are in right relationship to God. Notice in the third place, then, that the sinner who is indeed in a right relationship to Jesus will want to practice the Jesus principle. And why is this so? Simply because the forgiven sinner knows that God loves that other person, too. In God's eyes that other person is indeed a person of worth, he is someone of significance, someone of value. Jesus died for that other just as he did for me.

Jesus always had time to be kind and tenderhearted and forgiving because he looked upon people as persons of worth. When a sick woman in a crowd reached out just to touch the hem of his garment, he had time to stop and heal her. When the blind begger Bartemaeus cried out, Jesus had time for him as a person of worth. When ten lepers asked for help, Jesus had time for them because he saw them as real persons--persons who had value as human beings.

See how it works! An old, sick man was forced to go to a charity clinic because he had no money. There he was treated by the young interns. Some time later he inherited some money and he chose one of the young interns as his physician, this time on a paying basis. The young doctor asked him why he had been picked from all the other doctors who had treated the old man. He replied, "Because you always helped me with my coat." It was an act of tender kindness that mattered most to a sick old man. It was an act that said, "You matter. You are a person of worth." C. E. Albertson, in a little poem, expresses it this way: "Sometimes in folk around me With burdens, hurts and fears; Through joyful, happy hours And often through their tears; In some loving act of kindness As they show how much they care In the lives of folks around me I find God reflected there."

Yes, God calls sinners like you and me to practice the Jesus principle of an I for an I. We can practice that principle only when we are in a right relationship to Him. But when we are in that right relationship then we will want to reach out to others--others who are hurting--because in Jesus we see them as real persons, persons of worth, persons for whom Jesus died.

Let me tell you a story of how it works--of how one life can reach out and touch another life because a person cares, because a person wants to practice the Jesus principle of an I for an I. Imagine yourself in New York City during World War II. There are many service canteens for the soldiers and at old Collegiate Church they have one, too. The minister is a man named Joseph Sizoo and one night at the canteen the hostess points out to him a young sailor dressed in the uniform of the Royal Navy of England. He stands alone by an open window, staring blankly into the night. His body is stiff and tense, his hands at his sides are knotted into fists. The minister practices the Jesus principle of an I for an I and he goes over to talk to the young man. Soon his story is pouring out, "I grew up in St. Ives," he said, "with a girl who lived next door. Her name was Janie. Her folks were friends of my folks, and we all thought a lot of each other. When the war came, I went to sea. I have seen a lot of war down in the South Pacific. One day I wrote Janie a letter and asked her if she would marry me. She wrote right back and said she would. So, we made plans, and finally I got back to Cornwall with five days' furlough--all our own. We had a very pretty ceremony in the church we always went to. There was to be a high tea at Janie's house after the ceremony and then we were going off by ourselves for the rest of my furlough. But first I had a job to do. Things were a bit snarled up and it was my duty to report to the Admiralty Office that I was in town. The first chance I had was right after the wedding service, so I went down to the office and registered. Then I started back for Janie's house. It wasn't there."

