

66 - Love, Not Anger

John 11:47-53

Human beings have always had a hard time getting along with each other. The same forces that separate us from God also separate us from people. The Bible uses a simple word to describe those forces; it calls them “Sin.” Bundled into that one word are three destructive attitudes that have been the source of our troubles from the first humans onward. Those attitudes are selfishness, rebelliousness and independence. The “sins” we humans commit are the result of the “Sin” that’s inside us. If you examine the things we do that offend God and hurt others, you will usually find that they are the result of one or more of those three attitudes: selfishness, rebelliousness or independence.

Jesus went to the cross, not only to forgive our “sins” but to free us from the “Sin” that causes us to do those “sins.” He does that by giving us a new heart and filling us with the Holy Spirit. He replaces our selfishness with selfless love, our rebelliousness with trusting surrender and our independence from Him and others with humble cooperation. When that miracle takes place, a person not only enters into a new relationship with God but with other people as well. Those forces that used to drive us apart are still present in our “flesh” (our physical bodies and our old ways of thinking), but they no longer have the power to enslave us. That’s why John can say this in one of his letters:

“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death” We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1Jn 3:14, 16).

Selfless love, trusting surrender and humble cooperation not only draw us close to God, but they draw us close to each other as well. Those qualities draw us together for the right reasons, and they make it possible for us to accomplish amazing things.

Chief priests and Pharisees (Jn 11:47-53)

• DBS (Wed-Sat)

You couldn’t find two more different groups than the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were polar opposites in their beliefs (Ac 23:7-8), and they hated each other. But when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead both groups felt they had a common enemy. If He were allowed to continue, He would cause trouble for both. So they set their differences aside and became partners in a plot to assassinate Him. Bonded by their mutual hatred, these enemies became, for the moment, “friends.”

A common enemy

As we said, humans by nature have a hard time getting along with each other. But people still gather in groups. So what are the forces that unify selfish, rebellious, independent people, people who don’t naturally like each other? There aren’t many. One is money. People are paid to work together as a part of their job. They share assigned projects and can be friendly and helpful, but once the salary stops the relationships usually stop as well. Another is family. We live together or gather for events, because we’re related. Another is safety. We move near each other or band together to protect ourselves from danger. Another is learning. We go to school or meet in groups to increase our knowledge. And though the list could go on to include things like recreation, there aren’t many more. But there is one more that, unfortunately, we have to add to the list because it’s very common and very powerful. It’s anger. People who are angry at the same thing or person tend to find each other. They have a common enemy, and as the old saying goes, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” That group doesn’t bond because they like each other, but because they share the same dislike for someone else or some other group. This has always been a powerful force in human society. Throughout history people have joined mobs, movements, revolutions or plots, and those groups tend to last as long as the anger lasts; and anger usually isn’t satisfied until the “enemy” is defeated.

Warriors

There’s a part of every human, man or woman, that’s a warrior. God made us that way. And that part of our nature can be very positive as long as it is directed at the right enemy. God meant that “warrior” in us to be used against spiritual evil. He wanted humans to retake the planet by driving back the devil and his darkness (Ge 1:28; Ps 8:2). He gave us a warrior nature and spiritual authority, so we could win that war, but we’ve misused it to fight against each other. Here’s how the apostle Paul describes our real enemy:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual [forces] of wickedness in the heavenly [places]” (Eph 6:12).

Avoiding anger

I’m sure, by now, you’ve guessed where this sermon is going, because that “warrior” spirit that unites people around a common enemy is surging in our nation, and around the world, so much so that one could make the case that it feels like we’re entering the “last days” (2Ti 3:1-5). People are gathering to stir up anger, not calm it down; to identify enemies, not look for ways to heal differences; to point out what’s wrong, not what’s right. And that sort of “unity” isn’t healthy. Those angry emotions arise from our flesh, regardless of how “good” we believe our goal may be. And the anger it produces only gets worse and spreads to others. James says this: “For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (Jas 1:20). It ends up causing people to do things or say things that they are ashamed of later on. But thankfully in the midst of his description of that conspiracy to murder Jesus, John reminds us that our Savior came to bring people together for a very different reason.



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Gathering God's children (v52)

John was deeply aware that Jesus died, not only for the sins of Israel, but for the sins of non-Jews as well. He reminds us that Jesus died “not only for the people [of Israel], but so that He might also gather into one the children of God who have been scattered [abroad]” (literal). God's goal is to gather believing Jews and Gentiles into one, new, harmonious, spiritual family.

In other words, God draws people together for an entirely different reason than the world does. He draws His children together based not on who they reject but who they love. Paul instructed the believers in Ephesus to be “eager to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3), and then he reminded them of the foundational truths that bound them together. He said, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6).

To the believers in Corinth he said,

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1Co 12:13).

It's the fact that we all love Jesus that draws us together, and it's the new heart that He gives us that keeps us together. Selfless love, trusting surrender and humble cooperation allow us to be loyal to people who think differently than we do, who do things differently than we do and who come from different backgrounds than we do. What we have in common is so much greater than our differences.

A prophetic community

These are dangerous times. Everyone can feel it, believers and unbelievers alike. People are pulling apart over their differences and uniting around their shared anger. If that trend continues unchecked it can tear our society apart. That's why what we do as believers matters so much right now. If you or I allow ourselves to be drawn in to the anger that's swirling around us, it will inevitably sour our spirit too. We will become part of the problem rather than part of God's solution. In the midst of all the confusion the world needs to see what God's love looks like, not just listen to us talk about it. They need to see people who are very different from each other come together and stay together. They need to watch people who offend each other, forgive each other and be patient with each other. They need to watch strong-minded, independent people choose to submit to one another and work harmoniously together. They need to see people who pray for one another, rather than criticize one another. They need to see a community of people that gathers because of who they love, not who they oppose. And being such a community is much easier said than done. It requires each of us to die to our selfishness, rebelliousness and independence, and daily choose selfless love, trusting surrender and humble cooperation. But when we choose to live like that, and we can, we become a prophetic community that lets the world watch a little bit of heaven on earth. And as people grow weary of the bitterness and anger that's all around them they will be looking for people with a different spirit, and many will come and seek shelter among us.

These are dangerous times, but the very forces that make this season so dangerous also ripen the harvest. Already people around us are longing for something different. All this anger is frightening. What they long for, whether they know it yet or not, is for Jesus, who's waiting “to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.” Our assignment is to let them see His love among us and then welcome with open arms those who join us.

Questions

- 1) Have you ever seen a group of people who really loved each other? Who was it? What was different about them?
- 2) Describe a time when someone offended you, but the two of you talked through it and came out as friends. What did that experience teach you?