

POSSIBILITIES IN PERSONAL ANTAGONISMS

Luke 15:29

INTRODUCTION:

The past two Sundays we talked about the matter of happiness. I would like to continue this subject today about the possibilities in the personal encounters that we have with our adversaries and active opposition that may come to us.

We could illustrate this to begin with the prodigal son's elder brother. Many times people say that we treat him too rough. But it is interesting.

V. 28 - Angry - Father & Bro.

V. 29 - Lo these many years I have served you. All the time he had been working - grimly doing his duty. He had no thrill, no pride. It was just a burden, for him. He had been in service but there hadn't been very much love in it.

He also says I never disobeyed your command. He is very self-righteous. He regarded himself as a good man without any faults. It has been said that truly that is the greatest fault - is to be conscious of no fault. The self-righteousness shuts a man off from God and men.

V. 30, 32 - There is another revealing thing - the elder brother refers to the prodigal as this son of yours. He does not even call him brother. But the father speaks of this, your brother. Compelling him to remember the elder brother. Because he was self-righteous - he focused his tongue and tuned it on criticism. He was a kind of man who would rather see someone punished than someone forgiven. And I am going to talk about forgiveness before I get through with this sermon today.

The elder brother stands for the goodness which is unattractive. There are two Greek words for good. One means simply that a thing is good in quality.

The other word means not only that a thing is good, that it has winsomeness.

Which makes it a lovely thing. A real Christian's goodness is an attractive thing. It should help the church more than anything else if Christians would become good in this sense. The elder brother was a good man but his goodness was hard. Because he had none of the father's forgiving heart or love.

A preacher one time received a letter from the Midwest. A man had read one of these books. And had written a comment on it. I want to tell you that you and all the other ministers are wolves in sheep's clothing. You, and Fostik, and Billy Sunday, are all working a racket in your churches - they are just amusement compared to Coney Island, dance halls, which would be meaningless. Without the presence of the opposite sex. Like Satan, the father of lies, you say to people surely you will not die. But you will have your reward - defeat, disorganization, and scatterment. You say people today do not worship idols. But how about automobiles, airplanes, tall buildings, modern science. How about the future with NRA. With your buying now campaign. All these things are false religion and commercialism. All you ministers of prophets of Baal and Pharoah's chickens.)

Now let me ask you - are clergymen the only people who encounter such hostilities. Every man in public life encounters it. You take the situation of the average doctor. If his patient fails to recover, if they recover less rapidly, or less completely than anticipated - then almost without fail the physician is condemned.)

Why did he not prescribe a different treatment or remedy. Why did he not consult other physicians.

Well, think about the financial advisors, the bankers, the brokers, etc. If a banker strives to protect the funds entrusted to him - by depositors. He refuses to dispense loans with lavishness. He is certain to be denounced by the would be borrower. As hard fisted, greedy, totally lacking any public spirit. On the other hand, if he invests and he recommends investment that prove less profitable - then he

is denounced. He is stupid, he is actually dishonest. In politics - how simply the difficulties of the man who holds an office. For example, November, 1863, that was a long time ago. Abraham Lincoln stood in the battlefield of Gettysburg - this very month, 1863 and read a brief address dedicating the area as a burial place for Union soldiers. That address was now recognized as one of the masterpieces of English pros. But how it was condemned at that time.

The next day a hostile newspaper in Harrisonburg, Pa. published this incredible comment. "We pass over the silly remarks of the President, for the credit of America, we hope the veil of oblivion will be dropped over them and that never again will they be repeated or even thought of."

How in the world could a man manage such antagonism. But such problems are familiar to every person who is in public life.

But unhappily, this same problem develops in family, antagonism develops. There is resistance, there is opposition. There is domestic quarrels that are maybe sometimes concealed from the outsiders. But they are painful and they result into fudes. And some of these things go on from the second to the third generation.

A poet gave vent to this in his poem once. "Some say the world will end in fire. Some say in ice. From what I have tasted of desire. I hold with those who favor fire. But if it had to perish twice. I think I know enough of hate. To know that for destruction, ice is also great and would suffice."

Now what are the possibilities in these personal antagonisms which come and rise to the surface - like we discovered in the elder brother.

We make a sorry blunder really if we permit antagonisms to wreck our peace and mind and interrupt our work. Consider the antagonisms for example which grow out of ignorance. The letter which I read that was addressed to a minister about churches and preachers, being rackets. Now he knew so little about churches and ministers - and lumping them altogether. The comments of a man like that who know little about what he is talking about and berates others - should simply be ignored.

Antagonisms may be rooted in envy. Here is a woman who is happily married and whose children are a credit to her and to the community. One side of her is a woman who has never been married at all. On the other side lives another woman whose marriage is a bitter disappointment. Now there are hard feelings between the three neighbors. The woman's whose children are active and well-bred - the others secretly denounce them. Criticize them and the wound is deep. Now they must be analyzed and understood. But I think that woman needs to ignore them. That is the possibility. To expect good will and friendliness in such a situation is something that would be surprising in human nature. Resentment is almost certain.

250 years ago an English clergyman Fell, came to a position of authority at Oxford University. He introduced much needed and long awaited reforms. He compelled the students to attend their classes. He made the examinations stiff. And he expelled boys who showed that they were habitual troublemakers. Naturally Dean Fell was not over-popular with the under graduates. And one day Tom Brown rattled off a rhyme.

I do not love thee, Dr. Fell
The reason why, I cannot tell
But this alone, I know full well
I do not love thee, Dr. Fell.

Now we smile at that. Did the Dean need to worry about that indictment. Certainly not, because it came from a student that was on the verge of expulsion. And many times the antagonisms that come to you - as a first possibility, ignore it.

2- Second, the possibility of putting them in perspective. Yes, I think getting them in true proportions - in an active perspective. Most people find that criticisms come and they immediately lose their emotional balance. In fact, they have little capacity for discriminating judgement. And there are lots of people who disagree with us.

And there are lots of people upon hearing one of their friends circulate a bit of gossip about them - they immediately denounce that friend. And they call him a traitor. Now that verdict may be unfair. It may be just in justing. It may be something that is misunderstood. It may even be mis-reported. After all, people sometimes say one day which they bitterly regret the next.

Did you know that stories that come to us 2nd, 3rd, and 10th hand must be heavily discounted. If all of us would make it a rule to see antagonism in its true proportions - we would eliminate fully half of the quarrels and half of the hours of unhappiness that people have.

Many many years ago in Boston, a man rushed into Dr. Everett's house and demanded an immediate interview. One of the local papers published an article criticizing this man and his work - and now he was besides himself with rage and excitement. Should he demand a public apology from the editor. Or file his suit for damages. Dr. Everett listened quietly for a few moments. Then he interrupted the man's ramblings.

What should you do - my dear sir. Half the people who read that paper, never saw the article about you. Half of those who did see it, failed to read it. And half of those who read it, did not understand it. And half of those who understood it, did not believe it. Half of those who believed it, were people of no consequence anyway. Now that man spoke - he had learned to put things in the right proportion. And would to God that all of us possessed that power. So there is a possibility of

ignoring, of getting it in the proper perspective.

3 - Thirdly, the possibility of purging bitterness. Now it takes discipline to do what I am talking about now. When people have mistreated us - how do we banish this from our mind. How do we purge out the bitterness and get rid of the malice and all desire for revenge.

Why is such an effort essential - because it will work havoc within your inner life. You show me a man who will not forget and forgive, and you show me a man that is treasuring up secret grudges even against members of his own family, and I'll show you a man who has a desperate problem for himself - as well as for everyone else in his vicinity.

Now you can't think steadily and accurately about these violent antagonisms without being upset. It will do something to your mechanism.

Bitter memories are forever touching off emotional explosions within us. We ask for vindication.

And we need to know how to master and control our tongue. And know how to forgive 70 times 7. Jesus had a rule that was significant. A rule that would free us from any inward bitterness. That we could master life with.

You say to me, well, I could never lay aside all of these antagonisms, and resentments which I have. And I guess there are a few that you may never abandon.

There was a colored man in 1909, a school teacher by the name of Lawrence Jones. He went into a poverty-stricken community in Mississippi. In the town called Braxton. He had graduated from Iowa State University. There was no building available. He taught school in the open air to begin with under a cedar tree. Later, he used a cabin.

He drove the batts and the owls out - and he moved his pupils indoors. The next eight years he spent his life, and the level of that whole community began to rise. But mere tragedy overtook him. One night some white ruffins, many of them drunk, set out on a linching party. Jones, was a negro, and they happened to meet him first. He was walking home from a little church where he had been preaching. And he was seized by this gang - dragged to a huge tree, and they asked him if he had anything to say before they linched him. He explained very quietly that he was a teacher. He was a graduate of a white man's college. He told them the story of his school at Braxton. How that hundreds of children had already gone through that school. He talked about the struggles of the eight years. The men who had planned to lynch him - began to creep away silently into the darkness. Jones found himself entirely alone. He took off the rope and walked home. He was later asked if he did not hate the men that nearly murdered him. He replied - "I am too busy running my school to think about them. I haven't time to hate anybody."

Oh, that other people could learn that same lesson and have the possibility of being purged of that business. And the bitterness.

4 Fourth, the possibility of pardon. Now we have only solved half of this when we have come through these first points that I have suggested. We must go on and try and change our enemies into our friends. Somehow alter the attitude of the man who has been an adversary. Now what is the secret of this achievement. And I think here again, we will say that Jesus - who was not universally popular - among people. Some enemies who could never be transformed into friends that he met. Some of his critics who could never become admirers. And they hated him. But there are many antagonisms that can be removed.

And of course, one of the first steps is very plain, in this regard of pardon and forgiveness. We must make it a rule never to criticize our enemies or those who

are adverse to us in public. We may think what we will of them in private. But in public, no words should ever pass over our lips.

Because there are some individuals who take a malicious joy in repeating to one person - what another person has said about him. Sometimes this reporting is accurate. More often it is inaccurate. Gossips, talebearers, and trouble-makers take a delight in twisting words out of their original meaning. If we are going to seek to change our enemies into friends, and if we are going to seek to heal the atmosphere of tension and suspicion, we must do it in another way.

Robert E. Lee was a cadet at West Point. One of his classmates took a violent dislike to him. This continued for many years. His fellow officers made attacks on Lee's record and character. One day, a mutual acquaintance speaking with an apparent friendliness asked Lee what he thought of this hostile individual. To the questioners surprise, Lee spoke in the highest terms of him. The questioner said, I guess you don't know what he has been saying about you for years.

But Lee avoided the trap very skillfully. You have not asked me, he said, for his opinion of me. You have asked me for my opinion of him.

As far as Lee was concerned, the fude could not be carried on. Tale-bearers could not find any material there, to carry on the bitterness. We shall do well to try to change our enemies into friends. To remember that people who are hostile to us, at any moment, may change their minds. They may alter their attitudes toward us.

We usually imagine our enemies as strange creatures. Whose feelings never change. But how false that is. All men are quite changeable. Many times they misjudge, they mistreat.

In any or all the ways, there are changes that can be wrought. Inside a person

and in social re-adjustments. Now there are some things that are pointed out here in the elder brother. About the matter of forgiveness. And I would like for us to think about this possibility of pardon and forgiveness.

1 - First, we ought to remember God knows and fully understands the human heart.

There have been uncounted millions who have crossed the stage of life and not one of them made an appearance without God's knowledge. He knows more about you and me, than we know about ourselves. He remembers every detail about our lives. And about every person who lives. Jesus said that the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Jesus was trying to impress his disciples, that we are always within the circle of God's care and concern. God knows the secrets of the heart. There is a line that goes - his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.

This will help - and here is a possibility. Remember this.

2 - Second, God wants us to confess and repent of our sins. He is well aware of our evil thoughts. And our neglected vows and our broken promises and our wasted opportunities and the antagonisms and hatred. We need not to make excuses for our sins - since He knows all about us. It is not necessary to dress the soul up in some garment. We do not need to arm ourselves with good intentions. And noble resolutions. And we can brow beat others and try to say - this and so and thus and so about them. When there is a lack of dedication in our own lives.

There is an old song written by (Charlotte Elliott) - it will send chills up your spine. "Just as I am, thou wilt receive. Will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve."

Come to God just as you are - and he will lift your burden of sin. He will send you away with a new song. Put a new purpose in your heart.

sufficient to put all our failures, defeats, our mistakes into one big bag and say, Lord, forgive me. I believe a man ought to confess his sins as he has committed them - one at a time.

In Pilgrim's Progress, Christian brings a bag full of beads and thoughts and places them at the foot of the cross. Then he says Lord, here they are. And there are 300 things I have done, said, and thought that hurt you. And I never even seen them to be wrong. But I love you and I want to be your man and serve and help you. You will note that this was a part of his life that he did not recognize to be wrong. But he had unconsciously sinned against God and he wanted forgiveness. I believe we could all sleep better if we would confess all the sins that we know about, and then lay our lives at the foot of the cross and ask God to forgive the things we do not even see to be wrong.

3 Thirdly, God does not hold a past against us and his forgiveness is never continued. There may be times when we must take off our coats of pride and stagger back to the Father - like the prodigal son. I have fallen in that same trap. I am ashamed. I know - I promised never to do it again but here I am seeking forgiveness. God, will you forgive me. His power to forgive is without limit.

Peter once asked, Lord, how oft should I forgive my brother which has sinned against me. Til seven times - but Jesus said until 70 times 7.

I think there are many husbands and wives that need to come and get peace. And they will never get it until they forgive the husband or forgive the wife. And suppose God took the attitude that some people take. Suppose that after we made the same mistake twice or perhaps 3 times, God closed the door in our face. Suppose he said, I'm sorry, I cannot forgive you. You promised me the last time, you wouldn't do this again. Thank God, he is not like that. Whenever we repent, God forgives.

Fourth, remember that forgiveness only needs to be accepted. Not understood. For me, this is one of the great mysteries and miracles of God that I think even the elder brother could not grasp. He was praising God for his constant love and care. And he did not understand such divine blessings. When I think of forgiveness, we think of David who said, such knowledge is too wonderful for me - it is high. I cannot attain to it. Psalm 139:6.

An experience can be valid regardless of our ability to perceive or explain it. There are many things we use like the T. V., the radio, and we can't understand how they operate and how things come through the air waves, through the walls and the windows. But we know it works. Here is the electric light, but we know that electricity comes in. That is the important thing about God's forgiveness - the fact is that he does.

In the fifth place, it is God's way of saying, I'll give you another chance. I'll remove your personal antagonisms. And I will help you to go back to the past and to live better and have a happy life. He gave the woman at the well another chance. He gave Peter another chance. He gave the disciples an opportunity, to prove their faithfulness.

There are many stories that we could use to illustrate this and to put it all together. Dr. Cronin relates a story about his first assignment in a hospital in a Welch town. There was a little girl suffering from diphtheria. He had to cut a place in her throat so he could perform a tracheotomy. To place an incision there in the wind pipe to insert a tube. There was a girl nursing. She had graduated. And she told her if that tube stopped up, to remove it quickly, and insert it. You'll have plenty of time to do it he said, and then call me if there is any problem. Through the long night, the tube did get stopped up. The nurse panicked. Instead of following the instructions, she ran to look for the Doctor. When the Doctor got there, the child was dead. He was furious. He talked to her

for 20 minutes. The next morning, he wrote out and asked that her license should be taken away from her. And as he wrote it out, and she stood there, pleading Doctor, give me one more chance. Tears were coming down her cheeks. He turned and looked at her, layed the letter down, and said, I'll think about it. All night long he said I had dreams about it. And there was a little voice saying, give her one more chance. And then he said, I wake up and I prayed - oh, Jesus, that is what I had to ask you to do one day. Give me one more chance. Oh God, forgive me for what I nearly did. That nurse is the Supt. in one of the largest hospitals in Great Britain.)

This is a human story. This is what the Gospel does.

Several years ago a delinquent girl was a difficult problem, in the reformatory in N. Y. A matron was unsuccessful in dealing with her. And Kate, the new girl, was not responsive. She was savage. She screamed, she cursed, she beat the doors. She kept things in an uproar. And so they had her placed in hand-cuffs. The new restriction made her more furious. And at last, the matron plead and promised, and suddenly burst into tears. The girl gazed at her and asked, what are you crying for. She said, because Kate, I can't find anyway to help you - no matter what I do, I can't make you my friend. There was a long silence. Kate, spoke in a new voice. That is the first time anybody ever shed a tear for me. It breaks my heart, take off these hand cuffs. I won't be anymore trouble to anyone. This matter of forgiveness came. It was in an unpredictable fashion. But here was somebody who was in earnest. And the truth is, the profound wisdom of Jesus to get rid of the bitterness in our hearts and to conquer the enemy. There must be that kindness and that forgiveness. And we must never seek to overcome evil with evil - we must overcome it with good.

As the poet wrote - so we meet again in part. Oh, if you had held out your arms to me, I should have forgotten everything and come back to you like a repentant

child. Oh, if the elder brother and if we, like him - could find this.