

“Gentleness”

Body-Building LoveCall to a Higher Life, Part 4 – Presided by: Fr. Gary W. Thurman

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Transcribed by: Sis. Ting Librojo

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In the three previous sessions of this series we have learned about certain aspects of divine love: joy, peace, patience, kindness, and self-control. In tonight's fourth session we take some time to examine gentleness. This, too, is an aspect of love which does not really fit very much into modern society's understanding of love. The more popular concept today is that of “tough love.” This is usually just an excuse we use when we do not wish to demonstrate the compassion of Christ, or have lost it from our lives. Rarely anymore does anyone dwell on the gentleness of love. But tonight, we do.

Our first Scripture is, of course, from 1 Corinthians 13, this time the third clause of verse 5: “Love is not provoked.” Usually if someone is easily provoked, becoming upset or angry easily, we blame their temper. We say, “Wow, they are really short-tempered.” Actually, the problem is much more serious - they are short-loved. Maybe you can fix short temper with an anger management class or something, but if we are short-loved - and St. Paul says here that being easily provoked is a sign of lack of love - no amount of psychiatric involvement can deal with that. God is the only source of love, and only love can deal with our easily-provoked nature. And not being easily provoked is one sign of gentleness. So, this is a manifestation of divine love.

The verse goes on to say, “Love does not take into account a wrong suffered.” Love does not keep a check list of offenses or character flaws to hold over the head of someone else. It doesn't keep score. Isn't this exactly what it says in 2 Corinthians 5: 19 about God Himself? “God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” God doesn't count; He doesn't keep a record of sins. And, as we learned in the very first session, we should imitate God by walking in love. Part of love's gentleness is to not keep score, to forget, as it were. That's a big step for most of us to take, but that's why we call it divine love. It has to come from God!

Moving on to Romans 12, St. Paul's other description of divine love, we find some more confrontational and challenging aspects of its gentleness. Romans 12: 4 exhorts us to “Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.” These words are simply echoes of Jesus' command in the Sermon on the Mount: “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5: 44) Jesus equates praying for one's persecutors with divine love. This, too, is a manifestation of gentleness.

Moving down Romans 12 a bit, we see in the first part of v. 17, “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.” How about that mass murderer? He said “anyone.” How about the guy who stole my watch? He said “anyone.” How about that girl who is flirting with my boyfriend? What part of “anyone” don’t you understand? As it says further down in v. 12, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. As we learned last week, goodness is another aspect of love, one in close kinship with gentleness. And it overcomes evil, there is no need for us to resort to evil ourselves. How can we know that? Because goodness and gentleness are part of divine love, and love never fails, as 1 Corinthians 13: 8 proclaims.

A good example of how this works is in 2 Kings 6: 18-23. Most of us are familiar with the first part of the story, how the prophet Elisha and his attendant were surrounded by a great army of Arameans. They seemed hopelessly outnumbered, but God opened the eyes of the attendant to see the horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

We know that part, but it doesn’t stop there. Elisha prays for the Lord to strike the army with blindness. And when they asked for directions to Elisha, Elijah leads them into Israel’s capital city of Samaria! Israel’s king says, “What do you want me to do, my father? Shall I kill them?” Instead, Elisha asked the king to prepare a great feast for them. Then they went away. But the key is the last verse: “That band of Arameans did not come again into the land of Israel.” See the point?

That’s why verses 19-20 of Romans 12 say, “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink, for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.”

I think we can make a general statement based on these passages from 1 Corinthians and Romans: Gentleness always forgives!

All these situations mentioned involve the act of forgiveness. And yes, forgiveness is, indeed, an action. Forgiveness will not happen when we just ignore a situation where there is offense against us or from us. Time does not heal all wounds of offense. That is an old adage, but it is not Scripture. Consider: When Jesus told us how to deal with conflicts within the Church, He said, “If your brother sins, GO and reprove him in private.” (Matthew 18: 15.) The key word there is “GO! A word of action. And when the tables are turned, and you are the one who has offended another, what does He say in that case? “If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and GO your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.” (Matthew 5: 23-24)

There’s that word again - GO! That is a word of action, because forgiveness is an action. If you just sit on a grudge and wait for something to happen before you forgive, or just wait

until you feel like it, it will never happen. It might be pushed to the back of your mind, but whenever something happens to trigger the memory, the unforgiveness is still there.

Notice in these directions from Jesus the focus, the goal, is not justice. The attitude of the heart must be, "Let's fix this!" Why? Why attend to the mending of relationships, even at the cost of leaving an offering unattended? Because the Kingdom of God is all about relationships; you can live as a hermit away from any human contact, but you won't do it in the Kingdom of God. "Only the rebellious live in a lonely land." (Psalm 68: 6) And forgiveness is necessary in the maintenance of relationships; for any time you have two or more people involved, you will have offense, sooner or later. These offenses require forgiveness for the relationship to be restored and kept.

One might put even stronger: Forgiveness is not an option. You will never hear Jesus say, "If you decide to forgive someone." Never. And you will never hear Him say, "Pick your spot. Do it when the other party has proven they are worthy of it." Remember this: God did not forgive us when we repented. He did not wait for our tears and promises and yes, even conversion, before he forgave us. Romans 5: 6-8 reminds us that "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man, though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Wow, did you see that? God did not wait for us to repent before He forgave us. He forgave before we even asked for it. He forgave while we were still sinning. And who are we to think we can demand such repentance from the one who has offended us before we forgive? In that, we're asking more than God does! As 2 Corinthians 6: 2 says, "Now is the acceptable time!" Now! Today! Wow, do we miss that, or what!?

Job knew this. It says in Job 1: 4-5 that his sons used to like to party, and when the party was over, he called for them and offered sacrifices in their behalf, saying, "Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." So, before he even knew for sure if they had sinned or not, long before they asked for forgiveness, Job was asking God for it on their behalf!

If you still have trouble believing that the gentleness of love always forgives, let's look at the Lord's Prayer for a moment, the Matthew version. Starting from v. 12, it goes: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

That in itself is plain enough. But this portion in red, often called the doxology, is simply not in the oldest manuscripts. It makes it a great prayer, but it wasn't in Jesus' original

words. That's why many Bibles, and even liturgies, no longer include them. And when they are removed, the point becomes even more striking: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

Notice, temptation and evil are directly connected with lack of forgiveness. This was the original point, which is why Jesus reinforced it with verses 14 and 15. Let's go one step further. In John 20: 23 Jesus tells the disciples, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." We take that as proof that forgiveness is our option. But Jesus never said that the sins are retained by the one you refuse to forgive. No, remember, God has already forgiven them, and isn't counting their sins or keeping a record of their wrongs. They are retained by you, the one who refuses to forgive. Think on that for a while!

I close with one story, from the last few verses of Genesis. After 17 years as a family in Egypt, the sons of Jacob together again, Jacob dies. Immediately Joseph's brothers panic. What if Joseph finally takes his chance for revenge? So they concoct a story and tell him, "Our father said, 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.'" Now remember, this took place seventeen years after Joseph had revealed himself to his brothers and delivered them from famine. And yet, after all those years of favor, they still didn't understand the gentleness of love, of forgiveness, even to the point they felt they had to invent this story to protect themselves. Wouldn't that be enough to make you weep? That's what Joseph did. As the old song says, "If you don't know me by now, you will never never never know me." So do you think maybe God weeps when we similarly let our self-imposed guilt blind us to His mercy? Or prevents us from forgiving others?

No choices. No options. No delays.

Forgive.