

RADICAL LOVE
Exodus 23:1-9; Matthew 5:38-48

(Read Matthew 5:38-48)

Intro: The **Martyr's Mirror** was first published in Dutch by Thieleman van Braght and it tells the stories and testimonies of Christian martyrs, especially Anabaptists. Some of you have heard of it and maybe even read it, but I suspect that most of you have not. It is, however, a big deal for Amish and Mennonites.

Something I never knew until I researched the book looking for the story of Dirk Willems, (whom we will hear about in a bit), is that the full title of the book is *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Savior, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660*. I think I'll stay with the short title, thank you very much! The book covers martyrs for the cause of Christ from Stephen in Acts 6 all the way to the middle of the 17th century.

The story of Dirk Willems is found in the Martyr's Mirror and he is a picture of our topic today – radical love. He was an illustration of the fact that radical love is to die for – or certainly can be.

Here is why: in the winter of 1569 Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist, was arrested for the terrible crime of being baptized as a believer, which in effect meant he was rejecting his baptism as an infant as required by the Roman Catholic Church. He escaped from prison and was pursued by the jailer. The story goes that he ran across a frozen pond but his pursuer, who was hot on his trail, broke through the ice and was in danger of drowning or freezing to death in the water. So, Willems, taking Jesus seriously to love his enemy, returned to the ice and rescued the jailer. The jailer reluctantly took his rescuer back into custody and returned Dirk to prison. Willems was then tried for being an Anabaptist and then tortured in an effort to get him to recant and deny his confession and rebaptism. He did not and eventually was burned at the stake on May 16, 1569.

That is radical love, and it's something we can learn from the persecuted church. On this day when we learned some more about those who suffer for being Christ Followers around the world, and as we witnessed in the video, the example of actually praying for persecutors, we will continue our series Learning From The Persecuted Church.

As we have done for the previous three talks, I will begin again with the devotional upon which I've based the series. Let me read it to you:

Radical Love

Sometimes basic Christian concepts run counter to what comes naturally for us. They go against our basic nature, which is why we are not encouraged to be "natural," but rather we are encouraged to be "spiritual." Often, societal norms are completely different from the Biblical admonitions for us as well. One example of this is the concept of radical love.

Love is not something that we would like to think is contrary to our nature or to the norms of our society, but the type of love we are called to as Christians is definitely unnatural for us. Jesus made

simple, yet shocking declarations that may be hard to apply, but show us a radical approach to how we treat others.

“Love your enemies.”

“Pray for those who persecute you.”

“Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.”

“Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.”

These commands represent something far different, far deeper, and far more profound than what is natural to us. They are unnatural responses to unjust circumstances, but they are the responses of the radical love we are called to as followers of Christ. For the Persecuted Church, these are common experiences. The Bible commands this is how we should love and how we should live. The Persecuted Church shows us that it is possible to do so.

Enemies give us an opportunity to love at a deeper level. Unfair treatment and persecution teach us how to forgive at a level that most of us have trouble comprehending. What others meant for evil, God uses for good. We learn how to do this through the difficulties we experience at the hands of unjust people. The testimony of the Persecuted Church, whose primary prayer is for the salvation of their persecutors, lets us know this radical love is possible.

Isn't it amazing how God uses even our enemies and persecutors for His purposes in our lives? We don't have to live according to our natural impulses. We don't have to live natural lives; we can live supernatural lives.

This is a tall order, but it's possible, because all through the history of the Church and continuing today around the world, Christ Followers are living out the practice of radical love.

First . . .

Life as a Christ Follower is meant to be different

- We are different, aren't we? Jesus is calling us to be. This didn't start with Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, it was evident all the way back in Exodus when God, through Moses, commanded his people to be different and care for their enemies. One thing we can take from the passage that Karen read to us from Exodus 23 is that the justice given by the people of God must reflect God's justice not humanity's justice. Humanity has one way of seeing and doing things and God quite another.
- Jesus began his teaching in our text *“You have heard that it was said . . .”* and then corrects it with *“But I say to you . . .”* The example Jesus used was *“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”* which can be found in the Mosaic Law in Exodus 21 (Exodus 21:23-27), and also in Hammurabi's Code in Babylon and it was encoded in Roman law and everywhere in between. It was a better law than the previous way of doing things because it limited justice and revenge to only the guilty party rather than him, his family or clan, or town, or country.

- But Jesus is pointing out that while that was good, his way is far better. The old code was a lower law. The higher law is loving the one who does one harm rather than doing or wishing them harm in return.
- The persecuted church prays for the ones who persecute because they know they are called to radical love. That is because . . .

Jesus calls us to love and pray for those to persecute us or would be considered our enemies

- Instead of hatred, Jesus proposes love and prayer for persecutors. By doing so we prove we are . . . *the sons and daughters of the father who is in heaven*. Matthew 5:45. Commentator Suzanne Dietrich points out, “*This phrase gives us the key to the whole [Matthew 5:39-48] passage, indeed to the entire discourse: (She means the entire Sermon on the Mount) the real question is whether our deportment carries the mark of our divine sonship, or whether it is only like that of the tax collectors and Gentiles, that is, those who do not know the miracle of being loved by God.*”
- We Christ Followers know what radical love is because we have been loved so much by our Father in Heaven that he gave his one and only son to die in our place (John 3:16). That knowledge results in radical love and the witness of this kind of radical love can even win persecutors over to being sons and daughters of the father in heaven themselves.
- Now how about that last verse? Let me read it again, *You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*. Matthew 5:48. Really?

Who can be perfect?!

- Even the persecuted church are not perfect! I mean, Jesus was perfect, but who else is perfect?! One commentator simply dismissed Jesus’s admonition as impossible and another case of him over exaggerating to make his point. I think not! Jesus is calling us to be different, to not be driven to act like the world because it’s a fallen world. That is giving in.
- Jesus calls us to perfection because with his help we can close the gap between the fallenness of us without him and the perfection of us with him. Dietrich points out “*The Sermon on the Mount has often been reproached for lacking realism, for demanding the impossible. The Sermon on the Mount is good news only if we receive it from the mouth of the one who, himself, lived it, and who, by his grace, desires to live it again in us, to transform us into his image, to make us authentic sons of the Father.*” Christ living in us and us, in turn, living out his teaching in us, is his perfection personified. That is how radical love happens in the face of hate.

Conclusion: So how do we do it? How do we radically love those who would do us harm because of our living faith?

Prayer!

Persecutors are the most difficult enemies to love and prayer is an essential step toward loving them. While we don’t have a jailer chasing us across a frozen landscape, at least not right now, some day maybe, but not

now, we can pray, because we do have those who deride us for our faith, or maybe they discriminate against us in some way, or slander us, or make our life difficult somehow. Pray for them. It's hard to hate someone you are praying for.

The other night LifeGroups we talked about the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10. Jesus was asked how to receive eternal life? Jesus asked the questioner for a summary of scripture and the man's response what we call the great commandment which is "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.*" Luke 10:27. Jesus affirmed him in this, which wasn't what the man was hoping for, so he asked "*And who is my neighbor?*" Luke 10:29. Jesus replied with a response that could only indicate that a neighbor could be, and often was, an enemy. In the parable he used he talked about The Good Samaritan. Jews hated Samaritans! Samaritans hated Jews. A "GOOD" Samaritan for a Jew and a "GOOD" Jew for a Samaritan were contradictions in terms. But that is who our neighbor is. We are to love our neighbor as yourself – even if they are our enemy.

Who is your enemy? Who might be your enemy?

You need to love them. That is radical love. Amen.