

**“A Study of Understanding, Healing, and Hope”  
A Look at the Writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

***A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches***

**Session 3:**

“An Experiment in Love” (pages 16 - 20)

Luke 10:25-37

Matthew 18:21-35

**Background on the Text:**

These pages were part of a book by Dr. King, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, printed in 1958. The article, in this form, was later printed in and distributed in multiple publications. In this article, Dr. King lays out the six points that characterizes the nonviolent resistance movement, but especially emphasizes the “agape love” element that underlies each principle and the entire approach to nonviolent resistance, Christianity, ministry, and life.

**Questions to Reflect on as we Journey Through our Texts:**

- (1) Dr. King stated that agape love begins with “understanding, redeeming goodwill for men”. What are some areas of difference that you need some “understanding” that will help you show and share agape love?
- (2) Dr. King states that agape love springs from the “need of the other person”. How can we as Christians see the “need” (like the Good Samaritan), rather than see our own need or our own preference? On a daily basis?
- (3) “Agape is a willingness to go to any length to restore community.” Are we willing to go to any length to restore community? Establish community? Or do we have limits?

**Diving Into the Text...**

**The Nonviolent Resistance Movement**

Dr. King begins the article by sharing the different names his movement had been given – nonviolent resistance, noncooperation, passive resistance – maybe best defined by Christian love. Jesus of Nazareth stirred the protest with the creative weapon of love (p. 16). Mahatma Gandhi provided the method or technique through nonviolent resistance. The movement crossed denominational boundaries, something that the Christian Church had failed to do on Sunday mornings! Dr. King emphasized to all that joined that violence was not the

answer and hate would only lead to more evil. The ultimate goal was to win friendship and understanding. Dr. King emphasized to the resistance movement in Montgomery, Alabama, that nonviolent resistance was not an expedient movement, but ultimately it would be a way of life that could be adopted by all – not just those involved in the movement, but hopefully everyone.

Nonviolent resistance has six main characteristics, which we highlighted in the first article we covered in our study, “The Current Crisis in Race Relations”. I will briefly recap these six again, but will center our focus on the fifth, the characteristic of agape love.

- (1) Nonviolent Resistance is not passive. – One does not use this because they are afraid, nor does one passively accept evil. Instead, his/her mind is always active, constantly seeking to persuade the opponent that their way is wrong. Passively physical, but actively spiritual. Active non-resistant to evil.
- (2) Nonviolent Resistance goal is not to humiliate or defeat the opponent, but to win his friendship or understanding. Use boycott or noncooperation to awaken moral shame in an opponent with the end being redemption or reconciliation. Ultimate goal is beloved community.
- (3) Nonviolent Resistance attack is directed against forces of evil rather than persons doing the evil. The goal is to defeat the evil, not a person. In racial injustice, the tension is between justice and injustice, not white and black.
- (4) Nonviolent Resistance has a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation. For example, he does not seek to dodge jail if necessary (like we discussed last week with the African American college students). The unearned suffering is redemptive – it has tremendous educational and transformative responsibilities.
- (5) Nonviolent Resistance avoids internal violence of the spirit – refuses to hate his opponent, but instead loves him (agape love). We will expound on this point below!
- (6) Nonviolent Resistance is based on the fact that the universe is on the side of justice. There is hope in the future. This is the reason why the

resister can accept suffering, because there is an ultimate belief that all will be brought into harmony with one another in the end.

### **“Agape” Love**

Dr. King drew his thoughts on *agape* love from two theologians, Swiss theologian Anders Nygren and American-German Paul Tillich. Much of Dr. King’s theology and practice is rooted in Tillich’s practical approach to philosophy and ministry. Considered one of the most influential theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tillich’s work challenged Dr. King to apply his ministry and his nonviolent resistance movement for the “greater good” – not just for the African American community, but all society. This is where the concept of “*agape*” love became rooted in this resistance, and the foundation for the movement.

Dr. King shared that it would be too easy to grow resentful or bitter towards those individuals opposed to you. This would lead to hate campaigns or violence. This would only continue the growing trend of hate. Someone – the nonviolent resister – needs to cut it off! The only way to do this is with *agape* love. *Eros* or *philia* love, which is affectionate or sentimental love, is too much to ask for someone who is receiving direct oppression. However, *agape* love – understanding and wishing goodwill for all – is possible for those who are oppressed and suffering. This is the love of God operating in the human heart.

What are some characteristics of *agape* love? It is overflowing, purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is a disinterested love, meaning the individual seeks not their own good, but the good of their neighbor (p. 19). *Agape* does not discern qualities. With *agape*, everyone is your neighbor. Friend and enemy are treated the same. To add another point, color of one’s skin does not matter.

Dr. King shared that *agape* springs from the need of another person – the need for the belonging to the best in the human family (p. 19). The Good Samaritan serves as a great example of this. Paul echoes this when Christ came when we were sinners – when we were in need! Dr. King shared that the white man’s perspective was distorted by segregation in 1950’s and this showed a “need”. The African American community needed to show *agape* through the nonviolent resistance to help remove this tension and fear.

*Agape* is love in action, seeking to create, build, and preserve community – the goal of the nonresistance movement. This type of love is willing to go to any lengths, no matter the barriers. The cross is the ultimate symbol of this movement and this love, and the resurrection is a sign of its triumph. The Holy Spirit is the force continuing to work to establish this beloved community. Anyone who opposes it is working against all of creation. The ultimate realization is that all life is interrelated, and all men are brothers. If I hurt my brother, I am hurting myself.

### **Scriptural Foundations for the Text...**

#### **Luke 10:25-37...**

In Luke's Gospel, we are told the story of the Good Samaritan. If we remember how this parable begins, a lawyer asks an initial question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" After he responds with an answer to Jesus' question about the law, he replies to "And who is my neighbor?" The lawyer was squeezing Jesus for a response, but he was really showing a narrowing of human perspective. How far do we have to go? Jesus uses the Good Samaritan story to show how far we SHOULD GO, not how far we HAVE TO GO – all the way, and more. This is *AGAPE*. Where do we put up our personal limits? Where do we put up our church limits? How does this story apply to the racial tension and injustice in our country today?

#### **Matthew 18:21-35...**

In Matthew's Gospel, Peter asks Jesus how many times he or one should forgive his brother. Peter floated the number seven times, thinking this would be enough. The Jewish priests at that time taught that one only had to forgive another up to three times. Peter, thinking 7 (the "perfect" number) would be enough, was probably trying to get on Jesus' good side! Jesus responds 70 times 7. Dr. King used this number when talking about forgiveness in response to building community. *Agape* has no limit in terms of use in forgiveness in building, restoring, and establishing a beloved community. Just as Jesus taught his disciples to never stop forgiving (just as Christ never stops forgiving us), Dr. King shared that the nonviolent resister – and we as Christians – can never stop using *agape* love as our driving ethic. Do we ever say enough is enough? Is there someone in

our lives that we have trouble forgiving (even once? 3 times? 7 times? 70 x 7?)  
Is there a person/people group/organization that we have “blindness on” when it  
comes to forgiving? Showing *agape* love towards?

**Next Week – Wednesday, July 15 6:30 PM**

**“I Have a Dream” (pages 217 - 220)**

**Isaiah 40:4-5**

**Psalms 30:5**

**Galatians 3:23-29**