

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

Extreme Love
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“So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?” (King 126). The word ‘extremist’ has a negative connotation, but I believe that King uses this word to further support the Civil Rights’ Movement. To be extremists for anything is difficult, especially love. It requires us to whole- heartedly commit ourselves to the movement of our cause. It is dedicating our lives to the principles we hold to be true. To believe that love is powerful and the driving force behind a peaceful and equal life takes courage because nowadays love is an overused word with a dissipating meaning. The word love is thrown around with little concern for the responsibility tied to it and the person we love. We may stumble along, sometimes falling away from what we believe to be right, but if we get back on our feet and continue to support our cause then we are extremists. For love this can be more challenging because when we struggle and fall, the pain we experience is much deeper in our hearts and makes returning to stand more difficult. King loved God, his family, and

people of different races. Because of this he made a commitment to each, and he continued to stand for the power of love no matter how many times he was knocked to the ground.

When he speaks of being an extremist for love, he is referring to *agape* love. He defines it in *Pilgrimage to Nonviolence* as “understanding, redeeming good will for all men. It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human heart” (King 104). I believe that having this type of love is the first step to be an extremist for love that King strives to be and encourages us all to be. In Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth, he describes an incredible love, but is this the *agape* that King describes? Is it the love that can cause change as King desires?

In advising people to unite with their neighbors of the opposite race, King pushed Americans to end the hate with compassion for one another. King had reason to be angry with fellow clergy once stating “I have longed to hear white ministers declare: ‘Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother’” (King 127). King chose to embrace these people who hampered his movement. He could have lashed out at white clergymen but chose to address them through *Letter*

from Birmingham Jail, which addressed the issues of nonviolence as a solution. Loving each other in spite of the harmful actions we take against one another is to become an extremist for love.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul states the characteristics of Christ's love and encourages the Corinthians to emulate that love. He writes, "It [love] does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth" (v. 5-6). For Paul the key is love rejoicing in truth and not being resentful. Love follows God's plan and will. God wasn't resentful that His only son died for all people because it was out of love that He sent his son to Earth. Paul is also urging the Corinthians to turn against their bad habits such as claiming to be baptized in the name of different men, living for the day, and attempting to have all control. The Corinthians were constantly worried about wisdom and boasting. They were supposed to delight in what is right not the mistakes they have made or the differences they have with their neighbors, for this is the way that Christ loved us. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to show each other the love Christ showed for us by sacrificing himself and to have that love fill their hearts. Paul, like King, wants change by love, but the changes Paul seeks are less of a social and political problem than the race relations in America in the 1960s.

In these texts love involves some sort of sacrifice whether it is life or pleasurable living. To be an extremist of love means to be willing to do any of these in the name of showing the understanding and compassionate love of God. Paul also writes "love never ends" (v. 8). In Corinthians the love of God comes through the death of Christ. To sacrifice in this way suggests that God was giving of Himself to protect love among the nations always. Christ surrendered His life to teach others love and to give it to all. The sacrifice seems great, but it is really his expression of how deep and unending his love is.

As Christ's followers the Corinthians sacrifice for love seems petty and trivial. Indeed, though, it is a great sacrifice. They must learn that they are not perfect and admit to their faults without reveling in their neighbors' troubles. This sacrifice meant that they could no longer pretend that they were already in Heaven; instead, they had to take on new responsibilities to themselves, their city, and Christ. Living a life focused around the love God provides for them and wants from them means facing criticism and ridicule often. They must think over their actions and live a more conscious life.

King's imprisonment in the Birmingham jail shows yet another type of sacrifice involved in being an extremist for love. He is sacrificing his freedom to stand up for the

principles of equal treatment, opportunity, and value of human life. He holds these standards to be the truth. He forfeited his ability to directly lead sit-ins to prove a point about unity and protect the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement. His goal was not necessarily to protect those who he loved (although that was an effect of his work) but instead to protect concepts of morality and see that they were carried through to the future. By giving of his time, energy, and material life, he gives an even larger sacrifice to his cause.

It is difficult to see the correlation between this sacrifice and that of the Corinthians. Though, if we read Paul's letter to the Corinthians closely, we can see that he is encouraging them to give up their material life and face harsh disapproval by the other citizens just as King did. Belief in love caused both King and the Corinthians to face heavy scrutiny and struggle. Still the Corinthians sacrifice seems calm compared to the sufferings of Christ and even King. But the Corinthians live out everyday what we often do not. Because of Paul's reminder they attempt to give their control over to Christ, who they love. They chose to let love not earthly things rule their lives. Everyday the Corinthians could easily stumble, and to get back on their feet and support love is a great challenge. It calls for a complete lifestyle makeover, which King also endured by

sitting in jail and leading protests. The Corinthians' attempts to admit their wrongdoing and change in approach to life shows how much love they have for not only each other but the one who commanded this love, Christ. Trying to find their way back to a life more devoted to Christ's teachings is more difficult than that of King because the truth ruling in their hearts they have seen and have still fallen short. They are struggling to let their love follow God's plan and path, and having seen it in their lives before they are frustrated yet keep on going.

Paul recorded "love is patient" (v. 4). To be a radical of love means that you must recognize that you cannot enact change over night. It is a process, which you must be prepared to work through. A fanatic of love such as King may not be happy about it but he had to wait years to gather the support he needed to help end the worst practices of discrimination by love and nonviolence. While some discrimination may still be seen today, King lessened the extent and opened the eyes of many, but he did not live to see all that his work and belief accomplished. King believed that pacifism is to do something with your love, and in his case it was to patiently share his love until all could accept it. Waiting for years and not seeing its total effect is definitely extreme love. By waiting through the obstacles and allowing the civil right's movement to progress at its own pace shows

how far our patience can reach.

King did not possess the patience God had with the Corinthians (or with any of us for that matter) as seen through his extreme frustration and anger with white ministers. God's patience that Paul tells the Corinthians about is the most extreme form. He waits until we are ready to open our hearts to him and act with His love in our hearts. Paul wants the Corinthians to realize that the kingdom of Heaven is not on Earth with them and that they have to wait and be humble until that their time comes. Waiting while wondering and dreaming of the wonderful future will be is difficult, yet both King and the Corinthians endure it. The Corinthians yearn for a time and place even greater than that of King, but if they listen to Paul and wait uncomplainingly then their patience exceeds that of Kings.

To be an extremist for love is to love with the purity of God's love within your heart and be willing to sacrifice for others or others' well being. We can't be extremists for love and not have both of these qualities. We have to put them both in action together because they are not nearly as effective alone. That brings another issue of being an extremist. We are bringing about some sort of change or newness and to do this with willingness. No friend or enemy can force us into being extremists for love because then the love of God would not be ruling our hearts

and minds. Meaning Corinthians can listen to Paul, but they must make their own choice to let Christ reign in their hearts. Being an extremist for love takes a strong will and requires us to devote our lives to loving those who continually put us down causing us harm or hardship. This includes being open to the idea of sacrificing ourselves for friend, foe, ideals, and the future. The best role model for living this lifestyle is Christ for He was perfect. King is an example of living as close to this ideal as possible. He was fighting for a major piece of legislation and social change. With Paul's encouragement and reminders of Christ's message to the Corinthians were on their way to being extremists for love because they are bringing about change in their society by acting out the love in their hearts. Being an extremist isn't a bad position to have as long as it is for love because that brings about goodness to all. Taking a radical challenge to devote our attitude and actions to love takes the understanding of patience, hope and sacrifice, and this is truly agape. Christ and King had it and the Corinthians were working towards the example of Christ. The love Paul describes seems tame in comparison to King's passionate pleas for love, but in the end Paul's love saves the world from sin. It is agape love and meets King's entire criterion.