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1 Peter 3:8-12

Twelfth Message

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THE BOMB SQUAD: DISARMING EVIL

SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND

Four thousand years ago, God called Abraham to leave his land of idolatry in the Ur of the Chaldeans and journey to the new land of Canaan. An ancient Egyptian document of the mid-twentieth century B.C. describes Canaan as a land closely resembling the Garden of Eden: "It was a good land, named [Araru], figs were in it and grapes, it had more wine than water. Plentiful was its honey, abundant its olives. Every [kind of] fruit was in its trees. Barley was there and emmer. There was no limit to any kind of cattle. Every pleasant tree was mine."

Abraham dreamed of entering the Promised Land to find a Garden of Eden. In reality, though, he walked into a mine field where he experienced one explosion after another, especially in terms of relationships. John Calvin writing of the turmoil that Abraham experienced in the Promised Land, said,

[W]hen he is first called by God's command he is taken away from his country, parents, and friends, considered by men the sweetest things in life, as if God deliberately intended to strip him of all life's delights. As soon as he has reached the land in which he has been bidden to dwell, he is driven from it by famine. Seeking aid, he flees to a place where he has to prostitute his wife to save his life, an act probably more bitter than many deaths. When he has returned to the land of his abode, he is again driven from it by famine. What sort of happiness this—to dwell in a land where you often have to go hungry, even perish from hunger, unless you flee from it? ... While in uncertainty he wanders about hither and thither for many years, he is compelled by the continual quarreling of his servants to dismiss his nephew whom he cherished as his own son. Doubtless he bore this separation as if he had undergone the amputation of a limb. Shortly thereafter, Abraham hears that his nephew has been taken captive by enemies. Wherever he goes, he finds terribly barbarous neighbors who do not even let him drink water out of the wells that he had dug with great labor... Now when he has reached a worn-out old age, he finds himself childless—the most unpleasant and bitter feature of age. Finally, beyond all hope, he begets Ishmael, but the birth of this son costs him dear. For he is wearied by Sarah's reproaches... Finally, Isaac is born, but with this condition—Ishmael, the first-born, is to be driven out and forsaken almost like an enemy.¹

Have you ever dreamed that life would be like a garden, but instead discovered that it was like a mine-field? In the apostle Peter's day, Christians were maligned and slandered for the gospel. They found themselves walking in mine-fields in almost every sphere of life—the workplace, government, and the community. Their homes, which should have been shelters from the onslaught, were like the eye of a storm, since many new converts were married to unbelievers. How, then, were pilgrims to journey through life's mine-fields?

Peter's hope is that Christians do more than merely survive evil in life. He wants us to disarm the mine-fields and turn them into gardens. In our text today, he will show us four steps that will halt

the spread of evil: we must know the territory, enter the mine-field, disarm the detonator, and return to the garden.

I. Knowing the Territory (3:8-12)

To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. For,

**"Let him who means to love life and see good days,
Refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile.
And let him turn away from evil and do good;
Let him seek peace and pursue it.
For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous,
And His ears attend to their prayer,
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." (NASB)**

One of Peter's assumptions in the text, which is explicit in chapter 5, is that pilgrims cannot be naive about the territory they are entering. As Christians, we are to live in the midst of two worlds. One world is a garden where we are to cultivate our relationship with God, developing solitude, peace, and an openness to God's word. The Lord can walk with us there and work on our spirits.

But then we are to leave that garden and go out into the world. Peter says that out in that world life is like a battle zone, strewn with mines ready to explode. Our enemy, the devil, prowls in every sphere of life seeking those whom he can devour. He sows seeds of division—the destructive work of lies, slander and hatred. We are called to work in the midst of these mine-fields, but unless we understand that there is danger there we will be defeated. We must not be naive.

Regardless of its moral implications, one of the great tragedies of the Vietnam War was the strategy we employed in fighting there. It was fought by men who knew little about jungle warfare. It took each contingency a year to acclimate themselves to the conditions, and then they were sent home and replaced by other naive youths who had to learn on their own. In the process, many young men were killed.

This is similar to the experience of many Christians. We want to live in a garden, but we are killed when we go out into the world because we are unfamiliar with the enemy's tactics. So Peter warns that we must know our surroundings.

II. Entering the Mine-field: Caution! (3:8)

To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted, and humble in spirit.

Stepping out of the garden, we find that life is a mine-field. First, Peter says, "Caution: Danger! Work on your attitude." Bernard Baruch once wrote, "Whatever failures I have known, whatever errors I have committed, whatever follies I have witnessed in private and

public life, have been the consequences of action without thought.” Likewise, Peter says that before we step into the mine-field we must make sure we have the right attitude. If we are to be peacemakers in this danger zone, we need the five character attributes he lists in the text.

A. Harmonious

First, Peter says we are to be harmonious. We are to be of the same mind with one another, intent on the same purpose and disposition. That does not mean that we have the same opinions, but that we respect each other’s perspective. We are not to view ourselves as the center of the universe, as if everyone should submit to our way of thinking. Peter says there is a greater meaning to life than our small causes. It involves a King and his kingdom, and we must reflect his life if we are to fulfill his purposes. Therefore, we are to live without causing friction.

B. Sympathetic

Second, he asks us to be sympathetic. We are not to go through life unaware of others; we must enter into their experiences. In the Greek world, this word was used to describe the affinity and concord of the heavenly bodies. Notice that the heavens present an order. No star is independent of others; they all orbit in relation to one another. Likewise, if we are to be used of the Lord, Christians need to be in relationship with others, not orbiting in isolation. We must enter into the experience of those around us. This takes time—and humility. Do not be aloof, but feel the hurt and struggle that others endure. We must mourn with those who mourn, weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice.

C. Brotherly

Thirdly, we are to be brotherly. Others should find it easy to relate to us regardless of the degrees or titles we have. We must allow ourselves to be approachable, and not feel removed by our status. Ray Stedman has been a good example of this throughout his 40 years of faithful service at Peninsula Bible Church. In my 16 years on staff, I have never seen Ray, despite his genius and notoriety, use his position to be the senior pastor. He never operated with sole authority, but was instead was one brother among brothers.

It was a delight to see Ray retire last week in the same way he ministered—without fanfare, and giving glory only to God. His last act as pastor was not receiving honorific titles or degrees, but dedicating his youngest grandchild to the Lord. During the staff’s farewell dinner with him previous to the retirement service, I think it was symbolic that our present to him was not the traditional gold watch. Instead we presented him with a Mickey Mouse watch! What a fitting for a man who is unimpressed with his status!

As part of the retirement festivities, I read a short poem that I wrote in honor of Ray. In part, I said,

O Ray, you are that bright illumined star,
The Luther of our generation, new visions for the church,
This earthy genius removed that Papal Scepter,
And fearing none, returned it to the saints.

Who am I that I should sit at his feet,
Let alone travel in Elijah’s chariot,
Seeing the Divine gifts play their symphony,
Across the four winds.

And in the end, when he could have had it all,
When all others were playing the role of King,
He arose and said, “It shall not be so among you.”

And taking his towel, he sat down as a brother.

Friends, we are to be harmonious, sympathetic, and brotherly. Fourth, we are to be kind hearted.

D. Kindhearted: Tenderness

“Kind hearted” literally means to have “healthy bowels.” In the ancient world, this was regarded as the seat of the emotional life. The point is that it should not take much to move our heart into action, but we should easily respond to the needs and hurts of others. We must not be cold, hard-hearted, or so objective that we lack tenderness. We are to be easily moved by another’s pain, and easily touched by those around us. In our valley, we have many engineers and other professionals who are very objective, but they need to grow in this area of tenderness.

E. Humble In Spirit

Finally, Peter concludes with the greatest character quality in scripture—being humble in spirit. We are to think lowly of ourselves. The term was used of Jesus Christ “who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death of a cross” (Phil 2:6-8). This quality suggests that we must never allow our experience, gifts, or status to distance us from others. Rather, we must be willing to serve, appreciate and love the people whom God has placed in our lives.

George MacDonald, a Scottish storyteller of the last century, was a great example of one who manifested all these virtues. A man who went to him for counsel at a time when he was especially fearful and hurting wrote about what it was like to be counseled by George MacDonald:

I went with no little nervousness, but his reception put me at ease at once. I was struck by his appearance, of course — that beautiful, kindly, shrewd face...It seemed to me (I may reverently say so) as if I were talking to St. John the Apostle. I never think of Dr. MacDonald without instinctively thinking of St. John. There was in him that gentleness of humanity and strength—a depth of fire below the surface in spite of all his sweetness—that I fancy were characteristics of the disciple Jesus loved.

Well, we sat in the library...And then I opened my heart to him as I had hardly ever opened it to any stranger before. Doubts and fears—some burdens just then—were bluntly put before him, and he sat and listened with the utmost patience. It was strange—and yet it was not strange—to find myself talking to him so freely. I saw, I felt, his holiness and nearness to God, and yet I should not have been afraid to confess to him my most secret sins. There was a humanity about him, and a searching honesty, which, along with his sympathy, made me feel that he would understand me. He would not cast me out.

I suppose men and women felt like this when they talked with our Lord. His holiness attracted them, and His love and pity encouraged them to come and open up their hearts, sure that He would not drive them away.

I forgot much of his reply, but I remember this: ‘I should not be surprised,’ he said, ‘if God has not some special work for you to do.’ I cannot describe the comfort those simple words gave me. Then this tension of mind was a discipline, and meant good. I could bear it, and perhaps one day thank God for it.

Then just before I left he said, ‘But after all, whatever help or comfort any one may try to give you, it is but to follow the advice of Jesus. “Enter into thy closet, and shut to the door, and pray to thy Father in secret”—pour out your heart to God—get down on your knees—He will help you as no one else can, and will give you an answer in peace.’ I left him with ‘uplifted head,’ and thankful heart—but only years unfolded to me the depth of his words.”

May God give us the same spirit.

It is evident from media reports of violence that we are living in an increasingly hostile world. It is easy for Christians to be so fearful of the mine field that we separate ourselves from evil, pointing fingers at others in a spirit of self-righteousness condemnation. Peter tells us, however, that though the world may constantly reject us, we must not allow this rejection to harden our hearts or give us cynical spirits. Rather we must continue to foster the same spirit of reconciliation demonstrated by Jesus and reach out with a gracious smile, even to our enemies.

Now that we are in the midst of a mine-field with a quiet spirit, Peter goes on to tell us how to disarm the detonators.

III. Disarming the Detonators (3:9a, 10, 11)

As Peter writes, he is aware of changes that Christians were facing between the church and the state. In the book of Acts, Paul confidently looked to the imperial administration to protect his legitimate activity in proclaiming Jesus as the true fulfillment to the hope of Israel. As the gospel spread, however, Christianity became a whole movement unto itself and thus was no longer under the legal umbrella of Judaism. The economy was adversely affected since the new Christians no longer frequented the idolatrous temples. Business income went down for many Roman classmen whose livelihood depended on making gold and silver for these idols. Since Roman law prohibited interference with a Roman businessman’s work, Christianity was seen as a threat to the community’s economic health. It was the straw that broke camel’s back. The imperial state declared open war on Christianity, and the persecution began. Peter knew that the climate had changed, and many Christians would suffer the same fate as Jesus.

A. Absorb the Blast: Silent in Speech (3:9a, 10b)

Not returning...insult for insult

“Let him...refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile.”

Once in the mine-field, how do we disarm the detonators? First, we are to guard our speech. When others explode in anger at us, we are to absorb the blast of their words and say nothing. Peter says that we must not return insult for insult, but keep our tongues from evil and speaking guile. When someone blows up, we are to say nothing and listen patiently, just as Christ modeled for us.

B. Disarm the Detonator: Loving in Our Actions (3:9a, 11)

Not returning evil for evil...but giving a blessing instead.

“Let him turn away from evil and do good;
Let him seek peace and pursue it.”

After absorbing the blast, Peter tells us how to disarm the detonator. Do it with a blessing, says the apostle, not returning evil for evil, but turning away from evil and doing good. We are to seek peace and give a blessing instead by our loving actions.

And our blessing must not be like the rabbi’s blessing in the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. When a Jew comes to him and asks if there is a blessing for the Czar, the rabbi strokes his beard and says, “Oh, yes. May God bless and keep the Czar...far away from us! Amen.” That is not how Peter exhorts us to give a blessing. On the contrary, we are to get close to the people who irritate us, take the explosion of their speech, and love them. Therefore, go to work in the mine field and plant a garden. As we plant seeds of love and sow acts of kindness, we will be able to give flowers of grace.

A great example of this kind of disarming occurs in the sixth chapter of the book of Acts. There, a complaint arose by the Hellenistic Greek-speaking widows against the leadership of the church. They said they were being neglected in their daily food rations. This complaint was so explosive it could have split the whole church along racial lines. But in the wisdom and grace given to the leaders, they disarmed this explosive situation by choosing all Greek-speaking men to serve as deacons. Thus the deck was stacked in love. No one could possibly complain again.

IV. Returning to the Garden (3:9b, 12)

Peter says there is one more step after we disarm evil. We are to return from the mine-fields back to our garden to enjoy the intimacy of Christ.

For you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing...

“For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous,
And His ears attend their prayer,
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

This is a quotation from Psalm 34:15-16a which continues,

**To cut off the memory of them from the earth.
The righteous cry and the LORD hears,
And delivers them out of all their troubles,
The LORD is near to the broken hearted,
And saves those who are crushed in spirit.
Many are the afflictions of the righteous;
But the LORD delivers him out of them all.
He keeps all his bones;
Not one of them is broken. (Ps 34:16b-20)**

Abraham hoped to enter a Garden of Eden, but instead stumbled into one mine-field after another. His nephew’s herds grew so great in number that it created division and hatred with his herdsmen. Abraham responded by disarming Lot, graciously offering him his choice of land. It seemed as though Abraham was jeopardizing God’s salvation program because God had pledged the Promised Land to him. Yet he placed his future at the whim of an individual, and gave up his rights.

Lot looked with the eye and chose the well-watered region near Sodom and Gomorrah because it looked like the Garden of Eden. After he separated from his uncle, the Lord appeared to Abraham and they had a garden experience of intimacy:

And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, ‘Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your seed forever. And I will make your seed as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your seed can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its

length and breadth; for I will give it to you.' Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD. (Gen 13:14-18)

What gave Abraham the strength to give Lot the choice? Hebrews says, "By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Abraham knew the real inheritance was not merely turf, it was a heavenly reality of which the land was only a shadow. What he saw was the new heavens and the new earth. Thus, Abraham could freely give up his rights, his land—even his offspring. He knew that if God willed it would be a gift for him to receive. He did not have to strive to attain whatever he had.

In conclusion, let me exhort us in three areas. First, expect that this world is a mine-field, and be ready for it. Whether it be at home or in the community, we must be willing to take the blows of others.

Secondly, our hope is in a new garden being created by God. In an encouraging word to a woman who had just lost her husband, George MacDonald wrote,

Yes, dear, it is a hard time for you, but he is drawing you nearer to himself... We are in a house with windows on all sides. On the one side the sweet garden is trampled and torn, the benches blown down, the fountain broken; you sit and look out, and it is all very miserable. Shut the window. I do not mean forget the garden as it was, but do not brood on it as it is. Open the window on the other side, where the great mountains shoot heavenward, and the stars rising and setting, crown their peaks. Down those stairs look for the descending feet of the Son of Man coming to comfort you. This world, if it were alone, would not be worth much—I should be miserable already; but it is the porch to the Father's home, and he does not expect us to be quite happy, and knows we must sometimes be very unhappy till we get there.

These words express our hope.

Finally, we are called to disarm the mine-field. We know that this world is a dangerous place, and we are the only ones who can stop the spread of evil. Therefore, I would ask you to spend time in your own garden alone with God to work on your attitude so that you will be able to extend love to a hurting community. Then the mine-fields which once threatened to blow us up can be turned into a garden through the power of the Spirit working through us. At last, when we leave the mine-fields for the last time and enter our eternal garden, the King will welcome us, and say, "Blessed are you, O peace-makers, for you shall be called sons of God." Amen.

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.10.11 (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:437-438.

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