Book 14

SUNDAY, JANUARY 27, 1985

"HOW TO DEAL WITH HOSTILITY"

EPHESIANS 2:14-22

SOME YEARS AGO I WAS VISITING WITH THE DAUGHTER OF A MAN WHO HAD RECENTLY DIED. I ASKED HER WHAT SHE REMEMBERED MOST ABOUT HER FATHER. SHE SAID, "WHAT I REMEMBER IS THAT HE WAS MOST OF THE TIME UNHAPPY. HE GOT ANGRY OVER LITTLE THINGS VERY EASILY. I GUESS ONE COULD SAY THAT HE WAS FILLED WITH HOSTILITY WHICH HE NEVER SEEMED TO OVERCOME THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE." WHAT A MEMORY TO LEAVE WITH HIS DAUGHTER.

AS WE TALKED IN THE FAMILY LIVING ROOM, THE WIFE OF THE MAN WHO HAD DIED SAID THAT ALTHOUGH SHE WAS SAD ABOUT HER HUSBAND'S DEATH, SHE WAS AT THE SAME TIME RELIEVED. SHE WOULD NO LONGER HAVE TO BE FEARFUL OF HIS FREQUENT AND UNPREDICTABLE OUTBREAKS OF ANGER AND HOSTILITY. SHE HOPED HE WAS NOW AT PEACE.

A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE UNHAPPY AND FILLED WITH HOSTILITY. LEO BUSCAGLIA WROTE IN ONE OF HIS BOOKS THESE WORDS: "MY DAILY EXPERIENCES BRING ME INTO CONTACT WITH INDIVIDUALS WHO

SEEM TOTALLY LIFELESS AND FRIGHTENINGLY APATHETIC. MOST DISTURBING IS THEIR COMPLETE DISRESPECT FOR THEIR PERSONHOOD. MOST OF THEM DISLIKE THEMSELVES AND WHERE THEY ARE, AND WOULD CHOOSE, IF THEY COULD, TO BE SOMEONE ELSE AND SOMEWHERE ELSE. THEY ARE SUSPICIOUS OF OTHERS AND GUARDED ABOUT THEIR OWN SELVES . . . . THEY FEAR RISKS, LACK FAITH AND SCOFF AT HOPE AS IF IT WERE ROMANTIC NONSENSE. THEY SEEM TO PREFER TO LIVE IN CONSTANT ANXIETY, FEAR AND REGRET. THEY ARE TOO FRIGHTENED TO LIVE IN THE PRESENT AND ALMOST TOTALLY DEVASTATED BY THE PAST; TOO CYNICAL TO TRUST AND TOO SUSPICIOUS TO LOVE. THEY MUMBLE NEGATIVE AND BITTER ACCUSATIONS AND BLAME AN UNCARING GOD, NEUROTIC PARENTS, OR A SICK SOCIETY FOR PLACING THEM IN A HOPELESS HELL IN WHICH THEY FEEL HELPLESS."

THERE ARE MANY AMONG US WHO ARE FILLED WITH HOSTILITY--WHO SEEM TO BE ANGRY WITH LIFE AND WITH OTHERS MOST OF THE TIME. IN A RECENT BOOK ENTITLED, "TREATING TYPE A BEHAVIOR AND YOUR HEART," THE AUTHORS, MEYER FRIEDMAN AND DIANE ULMER SHOW THAT FREE-FLOATING HOSTILITY IS A MAJOR COMPONENT OF TYPE A BEHAVIOR AND THEREFORE A BIG CONTRIBUTION TO HEART DISEASE. THIS MORNING THEN, LET'S LOOK AT WHAT OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH HAS TO SAY TO US ABOUT DEALING WITH HOSTILITY FOR IT IS PRIMARILY A SPIRITUAL PROBLEM, ALTHOUGH

IT HAS MEDICAL AND PHYSICAL IMPLICATIONS. AND WE'RE GOING TO BE TALKING ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH THE HOSTILITY WITHIN OURSELVES, FOR ONCE WE CAN DO THAT, THEN WE CAN DEAL WITH THE HOSTILITY IN OTHERS.

FIRST, LET ME TRY TO DEFINE THE KIND OF HOSTILITY WE WILL BE TALKING ABOUT. HERE'S ONE DEFINITION: FREE-FLOATING HOSTILITY IS A PERMANENTLY INDWELLING ANGER THAT SHOWS ITSELF WITH EVER-GREATER FREQUENCY IN RESPONSES TO INCREASINGLY TRIVIAL HAPPENINGS. THOSE WHO ARE FILLED WITH HOSTILITY ARE VERY GOOD AT HIDING IT BY ALWAYS FINDING EXCUSES AND RATIONALIZATIONS FOR THEIR MORE OR LESS PERMANENT STATE OF IRRITATION.

FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN YOU BECOME ANGRY AT ANOTHER DRIVER, AS A RULE THE OTHER DRIVER HAS INDEED DONE SOMETHING UNUSUAL OR UNEXPECTED. OR WHEN YOU EXPRESS DISPLEASURE AT HAVING TO WAIT IN A LONG LINE AT THE BANK OR THE GROCERY STORE, YOU SEEM TO HAVE LOGIC ON YOUR SIDE. BUT SOONER OR LATER, YOUR FRIENDS AND YOUR FAMILY MEMBERS BEGIN TO NOTICE THAT YOU ARE FINDING FAR TOO MANY THINGS TO GET UPSET ABOUT, AND ARE ALSO GETTING ANGRIER THAN THE SITUATION CALLS FOR.

THE OTHER DAY I HEARD ABOUT A MAN WHO GOT SO ANGRY BECAUSE THE CAR BEHIND HIM HONKED THE HORN WHEN HE DIDN'T START SOON ENOUGH

AFTER THE LIGHT CHANGED--HE GOT SO ANGRY THAT HE JUMPED OUT OF HIS CAR, WALKED TO THE CAR BEHIND HIM, OPENED THE DOOR, GRABBED THE KEYS OUT OF THE IGNITION AND WITH A MIGHTY TOSS, THREW THEM INTO A SNOWBANK.

THEN I HEARD ABOUT ANOTHER MAN WHO OVER-REACTED WHEN HE HEARD HIS SLIGHTLY OVERWEIGHT WIFE CRACKING SOME ENGLISH WALNUTS IN THEIR KITCHEN AND SAID TO HER, "IF YOU KNEW HOW YOU LOOK IN THE BEDROOM WITH THOSE HUGE ROLLS OF FLABBY FAT QUIVERING, THEN YOU WOULD KNOW WHY HEARING YOU CRACK THOSE WALNUTS MAKES ME SO MAD."

HOW THEN DO YOU BEGIN TO HANDLE YOUR HOSTILITY? THE FIRST STEP IS TO DISCOVER IF YOU HAVE HOSTILITY WITHIN YOU. THE TELL-TALE SIGNS ARE THESE: (1) IF YOU BECOME IRRITATED OR ANGRY AT RELATIVELY MINOR MISTAKES OF YOUR FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS, ACQUAINTANCES, OR COMPLETE STRANGERS OR FIND SUCH MISTAKES HARD TO OVERLOOK; (2) IF YOU FREQUENTLY FIND YOURSELF CRITICALLY EXAMINING A SITUATION IN ORDER TO FIND SOMETHING THAT IS WRONG OR MIGHT GO WRONG; (3) IF YOU FIND YOURSELF SCOWLING AND UNWILLING OR UNABLE TO LAUGH AT THINGS YOUR FRIENDS LAUGH AT; (4) IF YOU ARE OVERLY PROUD OF YOUR IDEALS AND ENJOY TELLING OTHERS ABOUT THEM; (5) IF YOU FREQUENTLY FIND YOURSELF THINKING OR SAYING THAT MOST PEOPLE CANNOT BE TRUSTED, OR THAT EVERY ONE HAS A SELFISH ANGLE OR MOTIVE;

(6) IF YOU FIND YOURSELF REGARDING EVEN ONE PERSON WITH CONTEMPT; (7) IF YOU HAVE A REGULAR TENDENCY TO SHIFT THE SUBJECT OF A CONVERSATION TO THE ERRORS OF LARGE CORPORATIONS, OF VARIOUS DEPARTMENTS AND OFFICERS OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, OR OF THE YOUNG GENERATION; (8) IF YOU FREQUENTLY USE OBSCENITIES IN YOUR SPEECH; (9) IF YOU FIND IT DIFFICULT TO COMPLIMENT OR CONGRATULATE OTHER PEOPLE WITH HONEST ENTHUSIASM. IF ANY OF THESE DESCRIPTIONS APPLIES TO YOU, THEN -- UNLESS BOTH YOUR SPOUSE AND A CLOSE FRIEND SPONTANEOUSLY AND WITH OBVIOUS SINCERITY OBJECT, YOU SHOULD CONCLUDE THAT YOU POSSESS AT LEAST SOME FREE-FLOATING HOSTILITY. ALWAYS KEEP IN MIND THE FACT THAT THE GREATEST OBSTACLE TO RECOGNIZING THE NATURE OF YOUR OWN HOSTILITY IS YOUR EAGERNESS TO FIND EXCUSES FOR IT.

NOW LET'S SAY THAT YOU ARE BEGINNING TO ADMIT THAT YOU HAVE A HOSTILITY PROBLEM. THEN THE SECOND STEP BEGINS. IN ORDER TO BRING YOUR HOSTILITY UNDER CONTROL, YOU MUST CEASE TRYING TO CHANGE OTHER PERSONS AND OTHER THINGS AND INSTEAD CONCENTRATE ON ALTERING YOUR REACTIONS TO THEM. CHANGES MUST TAKE PLACE WITHIN YOU. AND THE KIND OF BASIC CHANGE THAT IS CALLED FOR MEANS YOU HAVE TO REPLACE SOME OF YOUR OLD BELIEFS WITH NEW ONES. IN RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE THIS MEANS WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT A FEW WEEKS AGO IN THE SERMON ON REPENTANCE--IT MEANS NOT BEING

AFRAID TO ADMIT YOUR SIN, IN THIS CASE - YOUR HOSTILITY, AND THEN TURNING AROUND AND STARTING OFF IN A NEW DIRECTION. IT'S WHAT WE OFTEN CALL--BEING "BORN AGAIN."

HERE THEN ARE SOME OF THE OLD FALSE BELIEFS YOU MUST GIVE UP, ALONG WITH THE NEW ONES TO TAKE THEIR PLACE.

(1) THE BELIEF THAT YOU NEED A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF HOSTILITY TO GET AHEAD IN THE WORLD. TOO MANY PEOPLE STILL BELIEVE THAT THE ONLY WAY ONE CAN BE SUCCESSFUL IN THIS WORLD IS TO BE HARD-NOSED ABOUT EVERYTHING. WHAT BEING HOSTILE DOES IS TO SPOIL HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AND IN THE LONG RUN ONLY MAKES MATTERS WORSE.

(2) THE BELIEF THAT YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR HOSTILITY. THIS ONE IS HARD TO GET RID OF. TOO OFTEN PEOPLE SAY, "I KNOW I'M HOSTILE, BUT I JUST CAN'T HELP IT."

(3) THE BELIEF THAT OTHER PEOPLE TEND TO BE IGNORANT AND INEPT. IF OUR WORLD WERE A PERFECT WORLD INHABITED BY PEOPLE EQUALLY PERFECT, HOSTILE PEOPLE WOULD STILL FIND PLENTY TO COMPLAIN ABOUT. PEOPLE WHO ARE HOSTILE, AND AS A RESULT ALWAYS CRITICAL, AND WHO BECOME EASILY IRRITATED OVER THE MISTAKES OF OTHERS DO NOT BEHAVE THAT WAY BECAUSE THEY HAVE A REAL DESIRE TO IMPROVE

THE WORLD OR TO HELP THOSE IN NEED OF HELP, BUT SIMPLY OUT OF AN URGE TO ASSUAGE THEIR OWN LOW SELF-ESTEEM.

SINCE YOU CANNOT POSSIBLY HOPE TO AVOID ALL IRRITANTS IN YOUR LIFE, YOUR ONLY HOPE IS TO CHANGE YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARD THEM. AFTER ALL, THE INTENSITY OF AN IRRITANT IN A VERY REAL SENSE DEPENDS UPON THE IRRITABILITY OF THE RECIPIENT. CERTAINLY THE WORLD CONTAINS PEOPLE WHO ARE BOTH INEPT AND ANNOYINGLY IGNORANT. VERY LITTLE YOU CAN DO WILL ALTER THAT STATE OF AFFAIRS, BUT PATIENCE AND A SENSE OF PROPORTION CAN MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER ABOUT IT.

ALSO, YOU ARE PROBABLY NOT AWARE OF THE SERIOUS SPIRITUAL DAMAGE YOU MAY BE INFLICTING BOTH UPON OTHERS AND YOURSELF BY YOUR OBSESSIVE FAULT-FINDING. WHEN YOU CONSTANTLY ATTEMPT TO MOLD OTHER PERSONS TO FIT AN IMAGE THAT YOU HAVE CONSTRUCTED, YOU ARE GUILTY OF WHAT THOMAS MERTON ONCE DESCRIBED AS LOVING ONLY THE REFLECTION OF YOURSELF YOU FIND IN THEM. YOU THEN DO NOT LOVE THEM FOR THEMSELVES.

(4) THE BELIEF THAT YOU CANNOT LIVE WITH DOUBT AND UNCERTAINTY. MANY HOSTILE PEOPLE ARE THAT WAY BECAUSE OF THEIR FRUSTRATION WITH THE FACT THAT THINGS CHANGE AND THEY CANNOT KNOW EVERYTHING THAT IS GOING TO

HAPPEN. THEY FIND IT DIFFICULT TO FACE THE FACT THAT THERE ARE ONLY TWO ABSOLUTE CERTAINTIES IN YOUR LIFE--YOUR BIRTH AND YOUR DEATH. YOU HAD NO CONTROL OVER YOUR BIRTH, AND YOU WILL NOT HAVE VERY MUCH CONTROL OVER YOUR DEATH. BETWEEN YOUR BIRTH AND YOUR DEATH, YOUR LIFE IS SHAPED A GOOD DEAL LESS THAN YOU THINK BY DELIBERATE CHOICE ON YOUR PART AND IS AFFECTED BY ALL KINDS OF VARIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES. IT IS YOUR LIFE--YET IT IS NOT REALLY YOURS AT ALL.

PEOPLE WHO ARE EXTREMELY HOSTILE NOT ONLY EXPECT THEIR ENVIRONMENT TO PRESENT THEM WITH ABSOLUTE TRUTHS AND CERTITUDES, THEY ALSO STRIVE TO ERASE DOUBT AND UNCERTAINTY FROM THEIR OWN THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS. HUMAN BEINGS ARE PERHAPS NEVER MORE FRIGHTENING THAN WHEN THEY ARE CONVINCED BEYOND ALL DOUBT THAT THEY ARE RIGHT. THEY ARE THEN WHAT WE CALL "FANATICS."

OLIVER WENDALL HOLMES ONCE SAID, "TO HAVE DOUBTED ONE'S OWN FIRST PRINCIPLES IS THE MARK OF A CIVILIZED PERSON." AND STRANGE AS IT MAY SEEM, AN OPEN ADMISSION OF DOUBT, UNCERTAINTY, ERROR, OR EVEN INCAPABILITY WILL NOT INCREASE YOUR INSECURITY OR DECREASE YOUR SELF-ESTEEM. IT USUALLY HAS PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE EFFECT. IT ALSO WILL SURPRISE AND PLEASE A LOT OF YOUR FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES. IN FACT, IT'S A GOOD IDEA

TO PRACTICE LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTIES AND DOUBTS. THE TEST OF A GOOD MIND IS THE ABILITY TO HARBOR TWO OPPOSING THOUGHTS AND STILL LIVE AT PEACE WITH ITSELF AND FUNCTION.

(5) ANOTHER FALSE BELIEF THAT MOST HOSTILE PEOPLE HAVE TO GET RID OF IS THE BELIEF THAT GIVING AND RECEIVING LOVE IS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS. THIS IS ONE OF THE SADDEST FALSE BELIEFS THERE IS.

HERE THEN ARE SOME NEW BELIEFS TO REPLACE THE OLD AND FALSE BELIEFS ON WHICH MUCH OF YOUR HOSTILITY IS BASED.

(1) THE GIVING AND RECEIVING OF LOVE IS ONE OF THE TRUE JOYS AND PURPOSES IN LIFE. IT IS NOT A SIGN OF WEAKNESS, BUT THE SOURCE OF SPIRITUAL STRENGTH THAT YOU HAVE BEEN SEEKING UNCONSCIOUSLY SINCE CHILDHOOD. BEGIN TO GIVE AND RECEIVE LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY AND YOU WILL FIND YOUR HOSTILITY DECREASING. ONCE YOU BEGIN TO LOVE IN THIS WAY, THEN GOD'S LOVE BEGINS TO WORK IN AND THROUGH YOU.

(2) BEGIN TO EMPLOY UNDERSTANDING, COMPASSION, AND FORGIVENESS WHEN DEALING WITH OTHERS. IT'S THE WAY GOD MEANT US TO DEAL WITH EACH OTHER. BE KIND. EVERYONE YOU MEET IS CARRYING A HEAVY BURDEN. ASK YOURSELF THE NEXT TIME YOU START TO BECOME HOSTILE AND

IRRITATED WITH SOMEONE--IF I DO BECOME IRRITATED OR ANGRY AT THIS PERSON, WHOM DO I BENEFIT? WHAT DO I ACCOMPLISH?

IN HIS BOOK, FRIEDMAN TELLS ABOUT ONE MAN WHO WAS WORKING TO OVERCOME HIS HOSTILITY. ONE DAY AS HE WAS STANDING IN LINE AT THE SUPERMARKET, A MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN JUST IN FRONT OF HIM AT THE CHECKOUT COUNTER BEGAN TO CHAT WITH THE CHECKER AND THEN HANDED HER A BABY SHE WAS CARRYING. THE CHECKER HELD THE BABY AND COOED AT IT. THE MAN WHO WAS WORKING TO OVERCOME HIS HOSTILITY, RESTRAINED HIS ANNOYANCE BY ASKING HIMSELF WHAT WOULD BE ACCOMPLISHED IF HE BECAME IRRITATED AND HOSTILE. THEN HE BEGAN TO ADMIRE THE CHECKER BECAUSE SHE WAS HUMAN ENOUGH NOT ONLY TO TALK WITH THE CUSTOMER, BUT EVEN PLAY WITH THE BABY. AFTER SHE RETURNED THE BABY AND THE WOMAN LEFT, HE STEPPED FORWARD AND SAID PLEASANTLY--"THAT SURE WAS A CUTE BABY, WASN'T IT?" THE CHECKER SMILED AT HIM AND SAID, "THANK YOU SIR. THAT'S MY BABY. MY MOTHER BRINGS HER HERE SO I CAN SEE HER SOMETIMES DURING THE DAY." IF THE MAN HAD BECOME IRRITATED AND HOSTILE AS WAS HIS USUAL HABIT, HE WOULD'VE SPOILED NOT ONLY HIS DAY, BUT THE DAY FOR OTHERS AS WELL AND WOULD'VE ACCOMPLISHED NOTHING.

(3) THE WORLD IS FULL OF JOY AND BEAUTY--BEGIN TO SEARCH FOR IT RATHER THAN LOOKING FOR THINGS THAT IRRITATE YOU. THE MORE

HOSTILE YOU ARE--THE MORE UNABLE YOU ARE TO SEE THE BEAUTY IN GOD'S CREATION. IF YOU FREE YOURSELF FOR NO MORE THAN A DAY FROM SLAVERY TO YOUR HOSTILITY, THERE IS A CHANCE THAT YOUR EXPERIENCE OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND JOYFUL COULD SO ILLUMINE YOUR LIFE THAT YOU WOULD BE LIBERATED FOR GOOD.

HERE'S A SPECIAL PARENTHETICAL BONUS FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE NOW PARENTS OF CHILDREN IN THE ADOLESCENT STAGE. SOMETIMES PARENTS ARE THE MOST FRUSTRATED AND HOSTILE DURING THAT PERIOD. TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, HORACE WALPOLE REMARKED THAT AFTER CHILDREN HAVE REACHED PUBERTY, THEY ARE NOT SUSCEPTIBLE TO UNASKED-FOR-ADVICE. I BELIEVE HE WAS RIGHT IN THIS AND THAT INDEED YOU WOULD BE WELL ADVISED TO REFUSE TO GIVE ADVICE TO ANY ADOLESCENT OR POST-ADOLESCENT CHILD, EVEN IF HE OR SHE ASKED FOR IT--UNTIL YOU ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN THE AFFIRMATIVE: (1) AM I QUALIFIED TO COUNSEL MY CHILD ON THIS MATTER? (2) CAN I BE ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN, KNOWING AS I DO HIS OR HER INTELLECTUAL AND EMOTIONAL CAPABILITIES, THAT MY ADVICE WILL BE FOLLOWED? (3) CAN I BE CERTAIN THAT I WILL NOT BE UPSET IF MY CHILD REFUSES TO HEED WHAT I SAY? IF THE ANSWER TO ANY ONE OF THESE QUESTIONS IS NO --- GO NO FURTHER.

INSTEAD OF ALWAYS WANTING TO GIVE ADVICE, EXPRESS YOUR LOVE AND APPRECIATION TO YOUR

CHILDREN.

(4) THE MOST IMPORTANT BELIEF OF ALL IS THAT HOSTILITY CAN BE OVERCOME. OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING UNDERSCORES THIS FACT. IT REMINDS US THAT GOD HAS TAKEN THE INITIATIVE IN OVERCOMING ALL HOSTILITY. LISTEN AGAIN TO HOW THE WRITER TO THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS PUTS IT. "FOR CHRIST IS OUR PEACE, WHO HAD MADE US BOTH ONE AND HAS BROKEN DOWN THE DIVIDING WALLS OF HOSTILITY."

WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO IS TO BEGIN TO ACT ON THIS BELIEF. HERE'S HOW TO BEGIN. THIS MORNING IN THIS WORSHIP SERVICE MAKE A COMMITMENT TO GOD THAT YOU ARE GOING TO BEGIN TO OVERCOME YOUR HOSTILITY. THEN FOLLOWING THIS SERVICE OF WORSHIP, MAKE THE SAME COMMITMENT TO SOMEONE VERY CLOSE TO YOU--PERHAPS YOUR SPOUSE OR SOME OTHER VERY CLOSE FRIEND.

THEN ALSO REQUEST YOUR SPOUSE OR FRIEND TO GIVE YOU A PRE-ARRANGED SIGNAL WHENEVER THEY OBSERVE THE SIGNS OF A HOSTILE OUTBURST COMING ON. THEN YOU ALSO HAVE TO PROMISE THAT UPON RECEIVING SUCH A SIGNAL YOU WILL MAKE NO ATTEMPT TO JUSTIFY YOUR ANGER, BUT SIMPLY STOP IMMEDIATELY.

REMEMBER IT IS NOT GOD'S WILL THAT YOU ARE TO BE A HOSTILE ANGRY PERSON. RATHER GOD WANTS EACH ONE OF US TO BE A JOYFUL AND

LOVING INDIVIDUAL. AMEN.