

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 30, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JAMES 1:19

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak
and slow to become angry, for anger does not
bring about the righteous life that God desires.”

AN ENEMY UNMASKED

Back last September I preached a sermon on the subject

“Stress — its Cause and Cure,”

and in that message, we talked about Type A and Type B personalities, and the prevalence of coronary disease among Type A people.

Since about 1920 coronary heart disease has been and continues to be the major cause of death in the United States and other industrialized nations. Many of those deaths occur in men during their most productive middle years, and the economic impact has been estimated to exceed \$100 billion per year.

It was in the 1960s that two San Francisco cardiologists, Dr. Meyer Friedman and Dr. Ray Rosenmann wrote a landmark book entitled Type A Behavior and Your Heart. Since then, “Type A” has become a part of nearly everyone’s vocabulary. The term, as you know, describes a person who is always in a hurry, is driven by an almost insatiable urge to succeed, and is easily stirred to anger by even trivial annoyances.

Friedman and Rosenmann concluded that Type A men were about twice as likely to develop coronary disease as those without the characteristics I have mentioned, whom they termed Type B. Do you know that over the past 20 years more than 2,000 papers on various aspects of Type A behavior have been published in scientific and medical journals, not to mention the many books and magazine articles intended for the lay reader?

However, not all of the recent findings have confirmed the initial results of the Type A research. It is not now believed that all aspects of Type A behavior are equally toxic.

A new book has just been published, authored by Redford Williams, M.D., who is a professor of psychiatry and medicine, and director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Duke University Medical Center, in Durham, N.C. It has the intriguing titles The Trusting Heart -- Great News about Type A Behavior. Dr. Williams and his associates at Duke, together with collaborating colleagues across the country, after more than 20 years of research and testing, conclude that “those aspects of Type A behavior concerned with rapid accomplishment

of tasks, and the achievement of lofty career goals are not necessarily toxic, and may even confer some protection to the heart and the vascular system.” That is to say, hard work and long hours and the drive to succeed do not, in themselves, create heart problems.

I think of a dear old member of my congregation in Philadelphia, “Uncle Will Fischer” as he was known to everyone, a multimillionaire who as a young man established a toolmaking and engineering business in the city of brotherly love. He told me that in the early years he worked 85 - 90 hours a week to get the business firmly established. He was one of the most gentle, kindly and generous men I have ever known. He always used to say that hard work never killed anyone. I buried him in the 92nd year of his age.

We all know that high cholesterol levels, cigarette smoking and high blood pressure are factors that increase the risk of deaths from coronary disease. But Dr. Williams and his colleagues at Duke and across the nation have found, through the most thorough, widespread and sophisticated testing, that the most dangerous enemy in Type A behavior is when all the strenuous activity is accompanied by cynicism, hostility, anger and aggression.

Dr. Williams writes, “Looking back, I know that I, like many others, found it hard to see why being ambitious should be so harmful; or even being in a hurry, for that matter. Hostility, on the other hand - well, it didn’t take much imagination to see that aspect of Type A as something that, at the least, should be harmful.” So, he holds the belief, backed up by the most scrupulous scientific research, that hostility holds the key to understanding what is harmful about Type A behavior. He says that “of all the characteristics grouped under the name Type A, only those concerned with hostility and related characteristics are toxic to the heart.”

Throughout the centuries people have been reported to have died suddenly while in the throes of anger or acute emotional distress. One of the best documented of such events was the death of the distinguished 18th century English surgeon, Sir John Hunter, Hunter is quoted as saying, “My life is in the hands of any rascal who chooses to annoy and tease me,” Now that remark would indicate that probably for years Sir John had nursed within his bosom a high level of cynicism and hostility and anger. He apparently had noted a link between his frequent attacks of anginal chest pain and run-ins with his colleagues. On an evening in 1793 his prediction proved accurate. After a heated argument with other doctors at a hospital board meeting, Hunter stalked out to an adjoining room, gave a deep groan, and fell dead.

Coming back to Dr. Williams, he learned, for example, that two psychologists at the University of North Carolina were doing a follow-up study of 255 doctors who had taken the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory while in medical school 25 years ago. The results were startling to say the least. Only 2% of those doctors with low hostility scores 25 years ago had died by the end of the 25-year follow-up. In contrast, those with high hostility scores experienced a 14% mortality rate during the same period. “In other words,” says Dr. Williams, “those physicians with high hostility scores at age 25 were nearly seven times more likely to die by age 50 than those with low hostility scores... All this was dramatic news indeed. Even the established risk factors for coronary disease - smoking, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol — did not predict higher death rates than hostility scores did in this and many comparable studies...the evidence was mounting that only the hostility-related aspects of Type A behavior are

toxic to the heart.”

“But,” you ask, “what is the hostile heart?” It is the personality that experiences annoyance, irritation, resentment and anger during the common, frustrating circumstances of everyday life.

- Do you get into a tizzy when lines move too slowly at the bank?
- When you’re in the 10-item line at the supermarket, do you count the number of items the person in front of you has in her basket, to make sure she hasn’t 11 or 12? And if she has, do you feel tempted to say to her in clipped tones, “Excuse me, ma’am, would you like to borrow my glasses so you can read the sign above this line?”
- Are you inclined to let your tongue get out of control when a fellow worker seems to make a mess of every job he undertakes?
- Are you quick to honk your horn if the car in front of you doesn’t take off into orbit the split second the traffic light turns green?
- Do you ever display rudeness, condescension, disagreeableness and contempt in dealing with people?
- Do you ever experience cynical distrust of others, believing that they are out to shaft you?
- Do you ever like to get even with those who have done you some wrong?

In a word, do you have a short fuse? If so, you probably have a high hostility level, so beware, and be eager to change.

On the contrary, the trusting heart makes a conscious effort to see the good in people; it believes that most people will be fair and kind in their relationships with others. Having such beliefs, the trusting heart is, in the words of our text, “slow to become angry, for anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” “Always eager to believe the best” about people (1 Corinthians 13:7), the trusting heart expects mainly good from others, and, more often than not, finds it. As a result, such a person spends little time feeling suspicious, resentful, irritable or angry. And the icing on the cake is that by such a healthy attitude, he keeps his heart healthy too!

If only we would take our Lord’s words seriously - -“Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you... Pray for the happiness of those who curse you; implore God’s blessing on those who hurt you... Treat others as you want them to treat you” (Luke 6:27,28,31).

Now, how can one get rid of the hostile heart, and develop a trusting heart? Let me offer a few suggestions:

1. **Confess your anger and ask for forgiveness.** The best place to start doing this is right at

home where we are often more rude and irritable than we are outside. Your reputation is what the world believes you to be; your character is what God and your wife know you to be! It is not easy to ask forgiveness for an irritable or angry outburst -- but ask -- your loved ones will respect you for it, and help you deal with your problem. To eat plenty of humble pie will soon take away your appetite for hostility!

2. Stop those hostile thoughts. As soon as you realize that you are having angry thoughts, yell as loudly as you can (though silently to yourself) "STOP"! Interestingly enough, those thoughts will actually stop, and with the Lord's help, the anger too will be cut short before it gets started.

A young father was standing outside a store minding his little boy in his baby carriage, while the mother was in doing some shopping. And this little monster was howling his head off! A lady standing by heard the father say, "Now Edward, take it easy; control yourself. Edward, don't make a scene. Edward, you've got to be good." And the lady said to the young man, "What an understanding father you are, saying those wise and sensible things to little Edward in his carriage." "Oh," said the embarrassed father, "that's Sammy in the carriage; I'm Edward!!" Stop those hostile thoughts!

3. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. I confess to you -- when I'm in a long line at the bank, I'm inclined to be very impatient. And then I look at the teller -- her fingers writing furiously, her hand stamping those receipts. She's going a mile a minute. And she looks down the line and sees all those people she still has to attend to. And I think, "Her nerves must be raw with all this stress and strain."

Or, I see a man in the line with an anxious look on his face, and I say to myself, "He's probably lodging his paycheck to help pay the percentage of the hospital bill which the insurance doesn't cover for his wife's cancer operation."

I look around and see no one who is even attempting to irritate me, so why should I be irritated?!

4. Learn to laugh at yourself. Now this is a hard thing to do! You're driving home at 5:30 p.m., tired and ragged. And a young turkey races past you in his red Mustang, cuts in front of you, then slows down for a right turn. And you have a sudden compulsive urge to break the 6th Commandment, or at least to lay on your horn and give him the business! But why not do yourself a favor? Why not chuckle to yourself and say, "Why should I be so stupid as to put an unnecessary strain on my heart, blood pressure and nervous system just because that idiot has to show me how macho he is by cutting me off at the pass?" Try to see the humor in the situation, grim humor though it may be -- and laugh at yourself and your foolishness -- and realize that you'll be home as soon as he will!

5. Pretend that today is your last day on this earth. Pretend you have just learned that you have a fatal illness. What is now important to you? The great Dr. Samuel Johnson used to say in thinking about condemned criminals awaiting execution, "There is nothing so designed to fix one's attention upon eternal things as the knowledge that within 14 days one will stand before his

Maker.”

In the light of eternity how foolish it is to be “done in” by the silly, petty, inconsequential matters that make us blow up in anger. Someone has said that we are all afflicted with a “fatal” illness called “life.” The only difference between most of us and those who have been given the bad news about a fatal illness is that we are less sure about “how much time we have.”

As you come to the end of the road, which would you rather have to look back on in your life -- cynical thoughts, angry feelings, and aggressive acts, or trusting thoughts, joyful feelings, and acts of kindness?

Recovered heart attack victims have often said to me, “You know, I used to get angry a lot, but since my heart attack I’ve realized that all these nitpicking things that used to rile me so much aren’t really worth the candle.”

By the way, have you watched the new Mike Ditka as he walks the sidelines at Soldiers’ Field since his heart attack? Why wait until you’ve had a heart attack to start doing something about this demon called “hostility”?

6. Practice forgiving. Simply and sincerely forgive those who have mistreated and angered you. Rather than blame them, rather than continuing to resent them, and to seek revenge, try to understand the emotions of the one who has wronged you. By letting go of the resentment, you may find, as psychiatrist Richard Fitzgibbons suggests, that the weight of anger lifts from your shoulders, easing your pain, and also helping you to forget the wrong.

It is surely appropriate that we should close this Communion meditation with this thought of forgiving others, because never are we nearer to the heart of Jesus than when we forgive. Even as He hung upon the Cross there was not a trace of hostility or anger in Him, but only pity and love -- “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

And of course, we remember those former words He spoke to His disciples, “Your heavenly Father will forgive you if you forgive those who sin against you; but if you refuse to forgive them, He will not forgive you” (Matthew 6: 14,15).

And our Lord’s greatest apostle exclaimed, “Now is the time to cast off and throw away these rotten garments of anger, hatred, cursing and dirty language... Because of God’s deep love and concern for you, you should practice tenderhearted mercy and kindness to others... Be gentle and ready to forgive; never hold grudges. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Most of all, let love guide your life” (Colossians 3:8, 12—14).

And again, he wrote, “Stop being mean, bad-tempered and angry. Quarreling, harsh words, and dislike of others should have no place in your lives. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God, for Christ’s sake, has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:31,32).

Have you a hostile heart that kills; or a trusting heart that gives glory to God, and brings blessings to others?

AMEN.