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## **“The Mindset of Faithfulness”**

### **Daniel I**

Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are young Israelites in exile. They are being taught the ways of the land in order that they might be able to serve in King Nebuchadnezzar’s court. The tension will rise throughout the book of Daniel as they seek to remain loyal to the ways of God rather than the ways of the land. It starts in chapter one where they are instructed to eat non-Kosher food. Let us look beyond the actual practice of eating Kosher, since we do not observe such dietary laws. The dietary laws themselves may have held specific meaning for these Israelites but they also had a deeper implication - loyalty to God. Daniel and his friends have the courage to seek to live out their faith even when it runs contrary to the laws of the land. Later in the book, they will not have the help of a guard on the inside and must face the prospect of being burned alive for not bowing down to the King’s idols. Yet the young men are loyal to their faith when it is simply inconvenient (here in chapter one) and later when it becomes downright dangerous. The initial test of faith in our text prepares the young men for a more stern test later. They are able to remain true in both cases. For the kind of faith that is compromised at the first sign of resistance or danger is not really faith at all. And a good question for us to ask ourselves is “when was the last time we risked anything for our faith?”

As tomorrow is the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, I want to address some of the ways that he lived out his faith against some of the opposition he faced. But I want to begin with a story about my great grandmother, Grandma Mills. Though she lived to 89, I knew her for just a few years as a young child. I recently heard a story about her young childhood. She grew up without a mother. Not too uncommon for the time, her mother died while birthing her. Back then there was no such thing as formula and so Grandma Mills was nursed by a black woman who had recently given birth and lived just down the road. As the black woman was nursing, she would feed her child from one breast and Grandma Mills from the other. It was a kind, generous act on her part but not too atypical for a small community such as that where the people knew each other. The interesting part of the story to me was that each child had possession, so to speak, of one of her breasts. They never switched or drank after one another. When I shared this story in the college Sunday School class a couple of weeks ago, one of the students said that indeed was “separate but equal.” That is all I know about the story, but a few questions might be worthwhile to consider. Why did the mother feed the children in this way? And why was it common knowledge that the children were fed in this manner? Did someone have the gall to ask her to feed the children like so? Or did they even have to tell her at all?

Some of you may have heard of a man named Steve Biko. He was an anti-apartheid leader in South Africa during the 70’s. He was brutally beaten to death in police custody in 1977. When I read his story one thing he said has always stuck with me. “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.” “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.” I can’t help but think back to the woman who nursed Grandma Mills. I wonder if she nursed the children as she did simply as a matter of course. To whom was it important that a white child not nurse after a black child? To her or others? The mother herself may not have even cared, but the fact that others took note of it is telling. I don’t know if she felt inferior because of her skin color or not. And sometimes, in a situation like that, where both parties knew each other, they each could uphold the unjust social expectations while disregarding the spirit that led to having it. In any event it is only fair to judge a person against her particular historical background. A related question for us to consider is what are the things which make us feel less than? Appearance?

## Popularity? Financial Success?

I don't know if that young mother felt inferior, but if we look at the young men in Daniel, they did not feel obliged to abide by the rules of the king. They did not seek to defy him per se but they were loyal to their God and to their faith. They did not assume that the king's non-Kosher food was better than vegetables and water. And later they did not abide by the law to fall down and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Now we come to Martin Luther King Jr. and his thoughts concerning just and unjust laws.

“Any law that uplifts the human personality is just. Any law that degrades the human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because Segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.”

Many of you know I attended the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. While in Richmond, I noticed that it had strong pretensions to being a seat of Southern culture. I question this because it was extremely difficult to get sweet tea in any restaurant there. However, the city is steeped in Civil War history and because of this they have a day where they honor Southern generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. It is on the same day that Martin Luther King Jr. is honored. It is called Lee, Jackson, King Day. As you can imagine this has not been met with a warm reception by the African-American community in Richmond. Oversimplified and somewhat revisionist Civil War history notwithstanding, it is a slap in the face to African-Americans. While both Lee and Jackson fought bravely for the South, to put a holiday for them on the same day as Martin Luther King is symbolically incongruous. King and what he stood for deserve the day unto themselves. Given enough time, equal rights under the law were probably inevitable for African-Americans here in the United States. The way they came about are a result of Dr. King's leadership. His method of non-violent resistance was in keeping with his faith that all people were of value. And he sought to influence white America while not by not returning violence for violence and not seeking to denigrate whites in the way in which many had denigrated blacks. He sought not only the good for black America, but for the whole of America.

While I think that the holiday should rightly be Martin Luther King Day alone, if I were to add somebody to the holiday it would be a Quaker by the name of John Woolman. He embodied the well-wishing of his opponent as Dr. King did. Woolman was an itinerant Quaker preacher in the late 1700's who traveled extensively throughout the American colonies. In his young adulthood, he was asked by his employer to write a bill of sale for a female slave. He did so as the slave was going to an elderly person who would treat her kindly. Woolman satisfied his conscience by telling both the buyer and seller that he felt they were following a practice that was “inconsistent with the Christian religion.” Thereafter, he refused to draw up documents for the transfer of slaves. On another occasion, as Woolman wrote in his Journal,

“A neighbor received a bad bruise on his body and sent for me to write his will. I took notes, and among other things he told me to which of his children he gave his young Negro. I considered the pain and distress he was in, and knew not how it would end, so I wrote his will save only the part concerning the slave, and, carrying it to his bedside, read it to him. I then told him in a friendly way that I could not write any instruments by which my fellow creatures were made slaves without bringing trouble on my own mind. I let him know I charged nothing for what I had done, and desired to be excused from doing the other part in the way that he had

proposed. We then had a serious conference on the subject; he, at length, agreeing to set her free, I finished the will.”

Going forward, John Woolman spoke frequently to slave-owners about the evils of slavery, and his gentle, non-condemning manner enabled him to often convince without giving offense. His hearers felt he appealed to their consciences rather than assigning blame. The result was that it made all parties involved better as people. Woolman’s goal was to eradicate the practice of holding slaves among Quakers. Though effective, he did not succeed in his goal during his lifetime. However, the Quakers did go on to become the first major religious group in our country to be totally free of slave holding.

John Woolman had the distinct advantage of being a white person advocating freedom and was therefore viewed as less of an adversary. Nevertheless, the principle of King and Woolman was the same - to act in a manner that did not wish ill on the opponent. For Woolman this came by not condemning. For King this came through not returning violence for violence. Martin Luther King knew that violence never really dealt with the basic evil of the situation in our country and he explained why.

“Violence may murder the murderer, but it doesn’t murder murder.  
Violence may murder the liar, but it doesn’t murder lie; it doesn’t establish truth.  
Violence may even murder the dishonest man, but it doesn’t murder dishonesty.  
Violence may go to the point of murdering the hater, but it doesn’t murder hate.  
It may increase hate. It is simply a descending spiral leading nowhere.  
This is the ultimate weakness of violence.  
It multiplies evil and violence in the universe. It doesn’t solve any problems.”

Not all African-American leaders advocated a non-violent approach to obtain equal rights under the law. The phrase “by any means necessary” was spoken by Malcolm X. And, of course, white America preferred Martin to Malcolm. He was less of a personal threat. But in all honesty, Malcolm X sought to achieve freedom in the same way that much of white America sought to deny it - by using whatever it took. And King himself would later find that while much of white America was repulsed by the violence of Southern bigots, they were reluctant to embrace true equality. Taking a stand for decency was not the same as standing for equality. The privileged do not willingly give up their advantages. Having achieved equality for Black America under the law, King began to fight against poverty, racism, and war and he found himself increasingly isolated. As a result, King lost some of his faith in humanity as a whole - in black America for becoming more predisposed to violence, and in white America for drawing a line when equality began to entail personal cost on their part.

Martin Luther King may have lost some of his faith in the goodness of humanity, but he never lost his faith in God saying, “If every Negro in the United States turns to violence, I’m going to stand up and be the only voice to say it is wrong.” And

“I’ve decided what I’m going to do. I ain’t going to kill nobody in Mississippi... in Vietnam. I ain’t going to study war no more. And you know what?

I don’t care who doesn’t like what I say about it. On some positions, cowardice asks the question, ‘is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘is it politic?’ Vanity asks the question, ‘is it popular?’ But conscience asks the question, ‘is it right?’ And there comes a time when a true follower of Jesus Christ must take a stand that’s neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take that stand because it is right.”

I recently saw an interview of Martin Luther King from November of 1967. Mike Douglas was

hosting him on his show, and he and singer Tony Martin were interviewing King. They were asking him questions about the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam. King considered the war in Vietnam bloody, costly, and futile. Tony Martin asked him if he felt that his view on Vietnam was alienating some who had previously supported the civil rights movement. King responded by saying first that soldiers were fighting bravely and sacrificially over there but that he didn't think they needed to be dying. Then he said that anyone who was committed to civil rights before but is no longer was never really committed to civil rights in the first place. Mike Douglas went on to ask King if he was a communist. King replied that he believed in the political freedoms of America and that his faith would never allow him to embrace a political philosophy built on atheism, materialism, and totalitarianism. King was finally asked about other African-American leaders who did not adhere to non-violent principles as the only means to obtain civil rights. King responded with the following: "Peace is not just the goal, but a means by which we arrive at that goal." Throughout the interview, King was asked pointed questions and responded as sincerely as he could. It was clear to me that even as Mike Douglas and Tony Martin smiled, shook King's hand, and thanked him at the end that they didn't want to be seen as too comfortable with King.

I want to return to an incident in the life of John Woolman here. While Woolman sought to eradicate slavery, he also spent considerable time in Christian fellowship with Native Americans. Sometimes, if the spirit was strong, he would stay among them for days. Because of the language barrier, Woolman used an interpreter. Once he began to pour his heart out in prayer and forgot to wait for his interpreter. The interpreter started to interrupt but was stopped by the Indian chief. When Woolman finished praying, the Indian chief put his hand over his heart and said "I love to feel where words come from." To me that is the crux of the matter with Martin Luther King, whether you affirm all his views or not. He did his best to be good to all parties involved and he did not let fear sway him from doing so.

Jesus once said "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house." (Matthew 13:57) You might add "and in his own time" to that as well. King was and to some degree is a controversial figure. It took martyrdom and time for him to gain a wider acceptance. And while he may not have fully lived up to the personal ethic of Christ, we do not have another figure in our country's history who came as close to living up to the social ethic of Christ. Whether you agree with all of views or not, ask yourself "where did his words come from." And ask yourself, "where did the words of his opponents come from." Whose words were motivated by hope and love? Whose words were motivated by suspicion, fear, and hatred? Many people are not willing to take risks for their faith. Martin Luther King was. On April 3, 1968 in Memphis, he boldly declared "I have seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but we as a people will get to the promised land. On April 4<sup>th</sup> he was shot and killed. At his King's eulogy, King's friend Ralph Abernathy, said "God we thank you for a leader that was willing to die, but not willing to kill."