

LOVE'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

by Ray C. Stedman

This week an editorial caught my eye as I was reading through the paper. The heading said, "Love Menaces The City." It struck me rather forcibly that love should ever be considered a menace. This week in Tampa, and in Cleveland, and in other cities, there has been violence in the streets menacing the life of a city, but in San Francisco it is love that is a menace. In the editorial there were quotations from Dr. Eric Hutchinson, who is professor of chemistry at Stanford University, who was discussing the situation in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, and the hippie society there with its emphasis on love. Among other things, he said these perceptive words:

"The proclaimed doctrine of the hippies, that they turn away from a hateful, unloving world and establish their own society of love, as they call it, seems to me has to be either selfish, materially erroneous, or completely hypocritical. I think it is selfish, in the sense that it is no great problem to love those who share the same viewpoints and habits as oneself. It is a greater sacrifice and constructive tolerance, to love those whose point of view is radically different.

"To escape the responsibilities of loving those whom we do not like by alienating oneself from the rest of society and entering a self-made ghetto, strikes me as being about the most ignoble form of self-centeredness that one could conceive -- quite the opposite of the society of love. It is in fact the worst kind of childish, sulky withdrawal from a society that one cannot control and that one is unwilling to convert."

Those are unusually keen insights into the character and nature of love. It is easy to love those who love us, and who share the same viewpoints that we share. But that is not really love. This is the very thing that John has been pointing out, this is not true love. Yet we stand in great danger of reflecting the same attitude toward the hippies that we deplore in them. If we withdraw ourselves from any contact or concern about them, because of their unusual habits or bizarre forms of dress, we are displaying the same lovelessness, the same inability to love those who do not correspond to what we like, as they do, and that is not what love is.

Last week, in studying this outstanding treatise on love here, we saw what true love really is, what godlike love is. It is the acceptance of another person because he is a person, quite regardless of whether he is dressed the right way, has the right status in society, belongs to the same class that we do, has the same color of skin, or whatever. Love is the acceptance of an individual simply because he is an individual. It is a willingness to have fellowship with him, talk to him, share life together to some limited or more extensive degree, only because you are fellow members of a race, fellow human creatures. It means you do so without requiring that he change before you establish the relationship. That is true love.

Also, as John brought out so beautifully in the section we looked at last, this is the nature of God's love toward the world. The world of human society is not beautiful; it is an ugly thing. Hidden under the surface are all kinds of rancid and bitter reactions. Behind the facades of even the most gentle and gracious personalities, outwardly, are thoughts, desires, and reactions that are ugly and cancerous. But God loves the world; he accepts it, he has contact with it. As John says, he manifested his love in the sending of his Son, at great cost, bearing shame, abuse and heartache. He came into the world, the very world his hands had made, and died here upon a cross of shame. Thus this is the nature of Christ's love for us. He became a propitiation for our sins, taking them all upon himself. In the mystery of those hours when darkness fell across the face of the land, some strange and remarkable thing happened to the lonely sufferer upon the cross. The sins of the world were laid on him and he became then the propitiation for

our sins. His total willingness to do that marked the full extent of his love for us.

Now where God's life is, God's love will be. This is the whole argument of this central part of John's letter. As we saw last, he says in Verse 12, "No man has ever seen God; [but] if we love one another, God abides in us [i.e., it is manifest that God abides in us] and his love is perfected in us." It is these two themes -- God's abiding in us and the perfecting of his love -- which form the subject of John's final discussion of this theme of maintaining love. First, there is the relationship of belief to love, described in Verses 13-16:

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. {1 Jn 4:13-16 RSV}

If you will recall, this chapter began with a warning against wrong belief. "Test the spirits," says John, "don't believe every voice that speaks in the name of Jesus these days, but test the spirits, whether they be of God." There is one supreme test, doctrinally. There must be an acknowledgment that Jesus is the Christ, that he has come in the flesh, and is the predicted One, this Jesus of Nazareth. By this you can tell the difference between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. That is John's emphasis on belief.

Then, in Verse 7, he moves right on to talk about love with an exhortation to love one another. Now, in Verses 13-16, he brings these two together, belief and love, and shows us the relationship between them. It is belief that produces love! Perhaps you have never thought of it that way, for most of us think of love as produced by happy circumstances, or by nice people, or by spending time together. I suspect that many of us are quite vague as to where it really originates. But John tells us.

"Faith," he says, "produces love," and he proves his point here. In Verses 13 and 14, he is referring to himself and the rest of the apostles by the word *we*. "By this," he says, "we know that we abide in him." That is, we apostles understand that we are of God and "abide in him" (i.e., have a continuous relationship to God). How? Well, "because he has given us of his Spirit." Now, it is not "because he has given us his Spirit." It is true that on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit of God was poured out upon these apostles and the other believers, all their doubts about Jesus Christ were forever settled. When the Spirit of God came to perform his function of taking the things of Christ and making him real to them, they realized that they knew Jesus better on the Day of Pentecost than they ever knew him when he was here in the flesh. They understood his purposes and his program far clearer than they ever did when he walked, lived, talked among them. The Spirit could make Christ more real than he ever was when they knew him in the flesh, and that convinced them that they were "of God." But what he really says here is, literally, "he has given us out of his Spirit," i.e., he has poured out from his Spirit, by means of his Spirit, something. What is it? Well, the context helps us to know. It is love. Remember that Paul says in Romans 5, "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who is given unto us," {Rom 5:5 KJV}. Love, God's love, the kind that accepts people for what they are regardless of what they are like, is a product only of the Spirit of God. He has given us out of his own Spirit, and, John says, that is why we know that we are of God, because the kind of love that only God can produce is in our lives and in our hearts. Now he goes on:

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. {1 Jn 4:14 RSV}

Here you can see clearly that he must mean only the apostles. "We have seen," he says, "we beheld him, we touched him, we felt him, we knew that he was alive from the dead, and we now testify that he was sent as the Savior of the world." This kind of witnessing, of course, followed the coming of the Spirit on

the Day of Pentecost, as Jesus had said it would. "Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses to me ... unto the uttermost parts of the earth," {cf, Acts 1:8 KJV}. They began to testify after they received the Holy Spirit. John reminds us that they had the evidence of his love by the Spirit, and they began to pour out in power the testimony that the Father had sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

Notice something important about that witness? He says that "the Father sent the Son." There are many people who are confused about this, and think that Jesus became the Son of God when he was born as a babe in Bethlehem's manger. But he was the Son before he came. The Father sent the Son. Christ Jesus was the eternal Son of God, and always the Son. This relationship of Father and Son is an eternal relationship. It was as the Son that he came to become the Savior of the world.

Again, notice that it does not say that he came to save the world. He does not save the world. He came as the Savior of the world, i.e., all the world could be saved if they would be. But as the Scriptures make abundantly clear, it is only those who believe that are saved. Jesus said to certain of his own day, "Ye will not come unto me that you might have life," {John 5:40 KJV}. And again, "if you believe not that I am he, you shall die in your sins, and where I am thither you cannot come," {John 8:21 KJV}. So, though he came to be the Savior of the world, in the sense of providing a redemption adequate for everyone, everywhere, it is only to those who lay hold of it by faith in his word, and make it personal in their lives, that it becomes experiential and evidential. Now, John says, this that happened to the apostles will happen to you, if you believe.

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. {1 Jn 4:15-16 RSV}

When you believe and confess that Jesus is the Son of God (and that certainly means more than simply believing that he is divine, it means that he is God, he is the Lord, to you), it proves that God's life is in you. Where his life is, his love will be, because love always follows the life of God. Therefore, you will begin to love. These are the marks, John says. Faith produces love. Your faith produces the love that accepts persons without distinction. The theology which robs Christ of his deity also robs man of the one belief that can generate love within him. Thus, to weaken faith is to deaden love.

How greatly we need to understand that in these days when there is so much talk about love and yet so little evidence of it. Love comes from faith, and if there is not this relationship of faith, belief in the Son of God, there cannot be the life of God and there cannot be the love of God. This is why we are seeing the phenomenon of hippies who are turning from what they regard as the phony love of the world (and in many ways they are quite right about that) and forming a society in which they produce exactly the same kind of phony love. That is why we see the square world, with its talk about love, rejecting this phony love of hippiedom, but going right on in its own way, producing phony love. Love comes from faith and without the relationship of faith it is impossible to have love. The only really loving person, then, is one whom, as John puts it, "abides in love," i.e., habitually accepts other people as persons without respect to their niceness or any other thing; the one who, without strain, without effort, regards people as people, sees them not as objects or obstacles, but as individuals, and reflects love to them and accepts them on that basis. That is what love is and that is how it is produced. John goes on now in this next section to show us the tremendous practical accomplishments of this kind of love. First, there is confidence in the day of judgment:

In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. {1 Jn 4:17 RSV}

"Confidence in the day of judgment": I doubt if there is a single person who does not realize, deep in his heart, that at the end of life there is an accounting. We must stand before the Lord, our Maker. It does not make any difference whether we are Christians or non-Christians. Our relationship with him may be different, but we must all come face to face with the Lord himself. He stands at the end of every path we may be taking today, and we must come at last to a day of accounting. This is what Paul declared to the Athenian intellectuals on Mars Hill, "God has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead," {cf, Acts 17:31}. That day lies ahead of us all.

But when we stop to think about it we cannot help but ask ourselves, how am I going to do in that day? Can I pass that unconscious test that Jesus speaks of in Matthew 25, when he stands to judge the nations and divides the sheep on his right hand, the goats on his left? He will say to the people on his right, "Blessed are you of my Father; enter into the inheritance which the Father has prepared for you from the foundation of the earth," {cf, Matt 25:34, ff}. Why? "Because when I was naked and hungry and in prison and sick, you visited me, you helped me, you did something for me, you ministered to my need." Do you remember their reaction? "Lord, when did this happen? We weren't aware of it. We don't remember seeing you, we don't remember doing these things."

Again, he says to those on his left, "Depart into everlasting judgment," {Matt 25:41, ff}. Why? "Because when you saw me weak and sick and in prison, you did nothing about it. You passed on your way, you showed no concern, you displayed no compassion, you did nothing." Again, remember that they say, with surprise, "Why, Lord, when did this happen? We don't have any memory of it. We don't recall it. If we had seen you we'd have done something, but we don't even remember seeing you." Of course the searching revelation of that passage is that this is now happening all about us. Christ is in all these situations of need, and when we are confronted with someone who has a need it is Jesus who is asking our help. Our reaction to that person is our reaction to him. There is no escaping that in this passage. We may quarrel about much else in the passage, but this is clearly what he means by this story.

Therefore is there not a question in each heart now, "When I stand before him like that, will I pass the test? Am I recognizing these situations now?" Notice that John says it is love "perfected" which gives us confidence in the day of judgment. Love which is perfected is love that is made visible in deeds. We saw that in Verse 12: "If we love one another," he says, "his love is perfected in us." It expresses itself in deeds, as he said in Chapter 3, Verse 18, "Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth." Love, even God's love, can never find its end, its perfection, until it is expressed in a deed or word or compassionate act. Therefore, note what John is saying: If you want to have boldness, confidence, in the day of judgment, then let love express itself, let it be perfected because it is when love is perfected with us that we have confidence for the day of judgment.

Will you pass that test? You will if you understand what John means by this wonderful little phrase that he inserts at the end, "because as he is so are we in this world." That is one of the most profound statements in the Word of God -- yet it is couched in the simplest of language -- every word is a monosyllable. "As he is so are we in this world." What does that mean to you? Do you understand that? That simply means that as Christ is now, invisibly, we are, in this world, visibly. In other words, it is a reference to what we have been seeing all along. The secret of Christian living is not in our feeble efforts to try to do something in imitation of him or in response to his command; it is to recognize his willingness to do all that he demands in us, to live in us. It is Christ living in me. It is what Paul says, "Not I any longer trying my best to imitate and obey the commands of Jesus Christ, but my trustful, quiet, confident expectation that he will fulfill his promise to live in me, and to do through me all that he wants done." That is what this means. All that he is, is continuously available to me. Therefore whatever I do, it is he that is doing it.

Now you can see what confidence this gives in the day of judgment. If he is going to look at my life and see the activity of himself in me, then he will not deny himself at the day of judgment. I know that what I am doing, if it stems from this source, is wholly acceptable unto him, and therefore I can have confidence in his presence.

Some years ago a group of us were in Newport Beach, California, having a Prayer Breakfast together. I recall that at the close of the breakfast, which was one of those times when it was very evident that the Spirit of God was working in unusual ways, I overheard two men speaking together. They were strangers to me, but evidently they were Christians because one of them said, "Oh, wasn't this wonderful! You know, I think God was really pleased at what happened this morning." And the other one said, "Well, he ought to be; he did it." That says it exactly, does it not? It is God's activity in us that is the basis of his approval on the day of judgment. Therefore, love expressed from this source, gives us confidence in the day of judgment, for he will not deny his own activity. Now the second thing that love accomplishes is in Verse 18.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. {1 Jn 4:18 RSV}

Love accomplishes something, not only for the future, but now. It casts out fear now. It gives us complete freedom from fear. Before we look further at this there is a translation we need to correct. In the RSV it says that "fear has to do with punishment," but that is not exactly right. What it really says is, "fear has punishment," not "has to do with punishment," as though it always produces it. Even more literally, perhaps, since this word for punishment comes from a root word which means to limit or to restrain, what John is saying here is that fear has limitation, fear imprisons us. Now is that not true? Fear imprisons us. Anxieties, tensions, worries, apathy -- all these things are forms of fear, and they literally imprison us, they limit us. I have known people who were unable to go outside the door of their house because of fear. I have seen Christian people who were unable to drive their cars because they were ridden with anxiety, or who were afraid to meet people, afraid to be in various circumstances. It is because fear has limitation. Fear imprisons us, narrows us in, binds us up, limits our life, pushes us into corners and keeps us there, and we cannot live as God intended us to live.

This is a common experience of life, is it not? What is wrong? Well, John puts his finger right on it. He who fears is not perfected in love. That is the trouble, that is the analysis. Love may be in him, if the life of God is there, but it is not perfected, it is not coming out, it is not expressing itself, it is not manifest, it is not taking the form of deeds and words, it is all inside. That is the trouble. Love, perfected, casts out fear. Now do you dare try that? What a dramatic solution to the problems of fear and anxiety, and yet, how wonderfully true it is. I have often seen it happen. There are those who have the life of God and yet never let it out; their pride and self-pity bind them up and they do not want to show love, they are afraid to. They are afraid it will open them up to be hurt, or that it will give someone an advantage over them, and so they bottle it up, keep it in, and then they wonder why they are oppressed by anxieties, tensions, and problems of nervousness. They are limited, unable to move and do as they ought to. But love, perfected, casts out fear. John is not talking about a perfect kind of love; it is love that is made perfect, love that is perfected, love that comes to its end and accomplishes its purpose. I have often seen people who begin to show love to somebody else, feebly at first, tentatively, perhaps saying but a kind word, but beginning to minister to another's need. As they did, they found their own heart flooded with release and deliverance. Gradually they were set free and able to be what they were intended to be.

Just a few months ago a couple came to see me. The woman sat in my study and told me she was a Christian, and had been for a long time, but her life had become so empty, so filled with meaningless drudgery. She had no spirit, no desire to do what she ought to do. She had a husband whom she loved, and a child, and she wanted to manifest love toward them. But she said, "Every morning when I get up I

feel so dead and dull, so lifeless. I lack motivation to do my housework. I just sit around. I don't want to talk to people." What is this? It is a description of imprisonment, is it not? Someone who is in prison. As we talked together I explained to her that the problem was self-pity. She was feeling sorry for herself and blaming it on others, blaming everything that was wrong on something else. At last she began to see that if there was to be any release she had to stop this blaming of others and see that it was her own unwillingness to lay hold of the riches of God, and to express the love that was in her. That was the problem.

She went back home and time went by. I did not hear from her and I did not know how things were going, until one day a letter came. I wish I could share it with you. She said, "Oh, I just want to tell you what God has done in my life. When I went home after our talk, I heard what you said, but I didn't agree with you. I spent weeks trying to fight what was wrong, and I kept trying to blame everybody else -- my husband, my in-laws, everybody else was wrong. I was feeling sorry for myself, but I kept hearing that little voice within saying, 'The trouble is you. It is you. You're not showing love, you're not laying hold of the possibilities that God has given you.' One day I got so sick and tired of being miserable that I decided I'd try it. I decided to forget about myself and show some love and concern to others and to rejoice in what God was to me, and refusing to blame others. I still have problem periods, but, oh, what a difference! Now I love to get up in the morning. The day looks exciting and adventurous to me, and I find myself filled with joy and with love once again." What had happened? Why, love perfected had done what God says it will do; it had cast out fear. Finally, in these last verses, look at love's possibility, Verses 19-21:

We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar: for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also. {1 Jn 4:19-21 RSV}

I like the bluntness of this apostle. He takes off the gloves and lays it right on the line. Look, he says, where does love come from? Don't forget, we love because he first loved us. That is where it comes from. If you know the love of God, if you know how fully he accepts you even when you are as stinky, nasty, and as miserable as you are, yet he takes you, forgives you, and deals with you; then you know what love is. You can love, because you have been loved. "We love, because he first loved us." It is not, "We love him." That is not what it says. It says, "We love -- anyone -- because he first loved us."

Then John really takes the gloves off. He says, "Look, don't be self-deceived about this!" It is very easy to kid yourself. But if you can say, "I love God," and yet you hate your brother, you're kidding yourself. You're a liar. How can you love God, whom you can't see at all, and not love your brother, when you can see his needs, his problems, and see what love can do in his life? God doesn't need your love, but your brother does. Also, the commandment of God, always based upon his availability to make it possible, is, "that he who loves God should love his brother also." If we have the life of God, we can show the love of God.

One of the most interesting things to me in pastoral counseling is to see how people scratch and fight like wildcats to say that they cannot love somebody when God says that they can. We want to find an excuse for lovelessness. It is not that we cannot love; it is that we will not. Is that not true? Then let us face it. John deals bluntly and honestly with us. If you really cannot, then you are not a Christian, he says. You are a liar when you say you love God. But if you love him, and you know you do, then you can love your brother -- and you must!

Prayer:

Our Father, let us not take these words lightly, let us not pass them off as but another sermon that tickles the heart a bit, but help us come to terms with these words, to realize that this is the explanation for what is wrong in so many of our lives. The problem is not others, whom we have been blaming, but rather, ourselves, our own unwillingness to show a loving acceptance to those who do not do the things we like and do not act the way we think they ought to act. Forgive us, and teach us to love, in Christ's name, Amen.

Title: Love's Accomplishments

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Scripture: 1 Jn 4:13-21

Date: June 18, 1967

Series: Maintaining Love

Message No: 8

Catalog No: 164

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