

THE PATH OF LOVE

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the most emotion-charged times in my recent trip to the Holy Land was to come around a corner of the Mount of Olives and catch a first glimpse of the city of Jerusalem. We spent a week in Jerusalem (on the Jordan side). Our hotel was located right on the Mount of Olives, commanding the most spectacular and dramatic view of the entire Old City lying beneath us. We arrived there in the evening and the next morning I was up early to go out into the brilliant sunshine and stand there on the Mount and look out over that city with its ancient wall and the temple area directly below, and the warren-like streets filling the area beyond the temple wall. From that vantage point I could see all the historic spots of Christian interest. My mind went back to the time when our Lord sat on the Mount of Olives and looked out over that stubborn, recalcitrant city. Tears came welling up into his eyes from a bursting heart, and he cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not!" {cf, Matt 23:37, Luke 13:34 RSV}.

The most compelling emotion I experienced while looking out over that city was the awareness that came drifting across twenty centuries, of the compassion and love of the Lord Jesus Christ for that city. The love of Jesus Christ! It has been the most compelling force in all history. The Apostle Paul could write to his Corinthian converts and say, "The love of Christ constrains me," {cf, 2 Cor 5:14 KJV}. It drove him out into all the cities of the ancient world. Throughout the twenty centuries that have followed, the love of Christ is the one force that has succeeded in breaking through the hard crust of human hate and suspicion. Time and time again it has melted the cruel, arrested the rebellious, and changed the implacable.

Years ago, in Virginia, I met an old man who was the rector of an Episcopal church. He had been converted in D. L. Moody's meetings in Cambridge, England. When Moody came to the center of English culture and education in Cambridge, the students were very much in rebellion against him. They felt he was a backwoods American who could not even speak the English language properly -- and he couldn't! They were affronted by the idea that this coarse, crude, vulgar American should be asked to speak to the cultured students of Cambridge. The man I met in Virginia was one of those students opposed to Moody. A band of them had agreed that, when the meeting began, they would break it up with catcalls, hooting, and mockery, and refuse to allow Moody to continue with his message. Sounds rather up to date, does it not? But when the meeting began, his associate, Ira Sankey, sang a beautiful number that greatly moved the hearts of those students. As soon as the song ended, Moody strode to the front of the platform and, in his characteristic blunt fashion began, "Young gentlemen, don't ever let anybody tell you that God don't love you, for he do." It arrested them. They were so startled by this ungrammatical beginning that they all paid attention. Again he came back to the theme and said, "Don't ever let anybody tell you that God don't love you, for he do." This student said that as he left the meeting that phrase ran again and again through his mind and he thought to himself, "Why do I fight a God who loves me? Why should I be in rebellion to such a God?" Later that day he sought out D. L. Moody, and Moody led him to Christ. As he told me that story, he looked back across the years to recall the time when he first came to realize the love of God.

That is the new theme to which we now come in the epistle of John. John has been talking about maintaining fellowship, maintaining truth, maintaining righteousness, and now he comes to the theme of maintaining love. It begins in Chapter 3, Verses 11-18:

For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, and not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not wonder, brethren, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death. Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth. {1 Jn 3:11-18 RSV}

You will note a familiar pattern in John's epistle, one of handling various contrasts. We have already heard him speak about light and darkness, death and life, truth and error, God and the devil; now he ties together these twin themes, love and hate. He presents them exactly as they occur in life; not in watertight compartments, isolated from each other, but intertwined together. In order to study them, however, we must separate one from the other. Today we shall look at John's tracing of the path of love, and next Sunday, at the course of hate. Here are two opposing emotions, love and hate, mingled together, and John traces them out for us that we might understand what these two mighty, powerful influences are. There are no two forces on earth today more powerful than love and hate. This section, therefore, has much of value for us. Now you will notice in Verse 11, where John begins his word about love, he suggests to us that the origin of love is the conversion of a Christian.

For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, {1 Jn 3:11 RSV}

It is evident that John sees love here as beginning with Christian commitment and conversion. It is produced, he suggests, by the message "which you have heard from the beginning." That is a familiar phrase. We have seen it many times in John. He speaks of "that which you heard from the beginning" which, if it abides in you, then you will also abide in the Son and in the Father. Perhaps a dozen times before this we have had this phrase, "from the beginning."

The epistle opens on that note. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, ... we proclaim also to you," {1 Jn 1:1-2 RSV}. This is a reference to the beginning of a Christian life. These who received this first letter are reminded of the beginning when they first heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. From that very moment they received a new awareness of the requirement of God in human lives, that we should love one another. The implication is clear here that this is not merely a command, such as we have in the Ten Commandments, but rather is the realization of the beginning of the possibility of loving one another. Such possibility originates with conversion.

I know there are many who are troubled by this. They are upset by the fact that Christians claim to have a monopoly on love, that real love only begins when you are a Christian and that it is impossible for a non-Christian to show genuine love. There are, as you know, certain words for love in the New Testament that indicate various qualities or aspects of love, but I shall not go into these now. I want merely to answer briefly some of these challenges.

There are those who say, "Isn't it true that atheists love their children as wholeheartedly and as genuinely as Christians do? Isn't that real love? Is not the love of a boy for a girl, or a friend for a friend equally as beautiful and as tender whether they are Christians or not Christians?" The answer of course is, "Yes. Love is love." The Bible never claims that Christians have a monopoly on love. But it does claim that love of the highest quality, love in its true aspect, begins to flow only in a Christian experience; that there is a difference between the love of a Christian and the love of a non-Christian, and it is a difference which is described in this very letter as the difference between death and life. We shall see, in Verse 14,

that John says we know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love, and he who does not love remains in death.

Well, what is this difference? We must, of course, recognize that all love is from God. God is love, John tells us. Love pours from God into human hearts like sunshine and rain, upon the just and the unjust alike. No human being would love if he were not in some relationship, in some contact, with the God who is love. All love comes from God; the love of parents for children, the love of friends for friends, the love of sweethearts for each other -- all is a gift of God to the human race, like sunshine and rain, food, shelter and raiment, and all the other things that make life beautiful, happy and wholesome. But something happens to the love of God; this pure, unspotted love which comes from God's heart upon mankind.

As the love of God comes into the twisted, distorted heart of fallen mankind, it becomes twisted and distorted, deflected from its true goal, and in fallen man it becomes love directed only toward himself. This is what happens to love before Christianity comes. It is self-centered love. There is nothing wrong with love itself; it is the direction it takes, the object upon which it focuses, which distorts it. Love comes from God, true; but love in the fallen heart is always twisted and distorted and centered upon self. Therefore, the love we show as non-Christians is really a love of ourselves. We love our children because they are extensions of us. We love our father or mother because *our* life is related to theirs. We love *our* relatives (presumably) because they are ours. We love *our* dog, *our* cat, *our* horse. We love the friends who please *us*, we love those who help *us*. If you observe human life you will see how true this is. Love is always directed to those who do something to, or for, or receive from *us*. Therefore, what we really love is the projection of *ourselves* in others. Thus, human love is self-centered.

Jesus recognized this in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" {Matt 5:45}. Why, even those despised tax collectors do that, he said to the Pharisees. If you love those who are kind to you, you are no different than anyone else. There is a quality of love which is manifest in human life, but it is always self-centered. But at Christian conversion something happens. At conversion there is born a different kind of love. When a person is born again he passes, as John says, "from death unto life," and he begins to love those he never loved before, and to love those he has loved before in a different way. I have seen this happen many, many times, and you have too. One of the clearest marks of a genuine Christian conversion is that almost immediately the individual involved begins to express concern for someone else, usually someone that he has had difficulty loving before.

That brings John to the second thing about love, in tracing the course of it here. The origin of it, he says, is conversion. The pure, unadulterated love which God intended love to be, begins only at the new birth; and it is the evidence of a new life that has been imparted.

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death. {1 Jn 3:14 RSV}

Now it is rather fascinating, is it not, that the apostle who wrote this has become known as the apostle of love. John says more about this great quality than any of the other writers, even though it was Paul who wrote that glorious paean on love in First Corinthians 13. But if you read the Gospel records of John, you will note that this is not his nature at all. He and his brother James earned from Jesus the title, "sons of thunder" {Mark 3:17}, because they were constantly wanting to blast back at those who opposed them. It was John and James who came to the Lord when a village refused to have them come in and said, "Shall we not call fire down from heaven upon them?" {cf, Luke 9:54}. It was John and James who were constantly quarreling with the other disciples. The temperament of this man, John, was not one of naturally showing love. But when he was born again, when he believed in the deity and lordship of Jesus

Christ, there was born into his heart the life of God and this man began to show love. So mightily did he master the lesson that he became known as the apostle of love.

Such love is the sign of the new life. It is a love which not only loves those who love you, but which loves those who do not love you. It is a love which does not depend upon a reciprocal relationship, but loves anyhow, loving the unlovely, loving the unqualified, loving the ungrateful, and the selfish, and the difficult. To view people apart from the relationship of Christian love is to see them as either our friends or our foes, as either rivals or helpers, as those who can help us along to the object we want or as obstacles that stand in our pathway to keep us from it. In other words, we do not look at people as people like ourselves, we look at them as either obstacles or helpers for us. We see them always as related to us. But when Christian love is born, a change takes place and we begin to see people as people, people like ourselves, needing love, having problems, feeling fears and anxieties and experiencing troubles. We are able to empathize, to sympathize, to enter in. This, then, is the character of true love, and it is always evidence that a new life has come, the life born of God.

Many of you remember from World War II the story of Jacob De Shazer, one of the members of Col. Doolittle's crew who bombed Tokyo early in World War II. He was captured by the Japanese and put in prison. He hated his Japanese captors and was so violent and vicious that his captors feared him because he himself feared nothing they did to him. They kept him in solitary confinement because of the hatred with which he lashed out against them. But in a remarkable way he obtained a copy of the Bible, and began to read it through. Reading through that book, in the loneliness of his cell, he came to realize the life that is in Jesus Christ. There came an amazing change over this man. His hatred of the Japanese changed completely. He began to love his captors and to show love toward them, and they were utterly astonished by what had happened to him. Instead of burning with wrath, resentment, and viciousness against them, he became the most docile of prisoners, eagerly cooperating with his captors, and praying for them.

Eventually, the story of his change of heart was written up in a little tract, and, after the war, it fell into the hands of a young Japanese, Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, the man who led the air raid against Pearl Harbor, and who gave the command to drop the bombs on that fateful day of December 7. Mitsuo Fuchida was a hero in Japan after the war because of that exploit and others, but his own heart was empty. Somehow he read the tract that told the story of De Shazer's amazing change of heart. He was arrested by the story and puzzled by it. From somewhere he obtained a New Testament and began to read it with growing interest and amazement. At last he came to the story of the crucifixion. When he read the Lord's words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" {Luke 23:34}, his heart broke. He realized that this One who could love his enemies and pray for those who persecuted him and despitefully used him, was manifesting a quality of life that no natural human being could possibly show. Mitsuo Fuchida became a Christian. Some of you may remember that he gave his testimony in the early days of Peninsula Bible Church, while we still met at the Community Center. Now he is an evangelist going up and down Japan telling forth the story of a love that can change human hearts.

Love like this is the sign of a converted heart. As John says, "if we do not love, we remain in death." If there is not this quality of love in us which can make us love those that ordinarily we would not love, then we remain in death. Of course, the most obvious place for it to show is with our brethren, with other Christians, for the hardest people to love are those closest to us. I have often quoted that jingle,

To dwell above with saints we love
O, that will be glory;
But to dwell below with saints we know --
Well, that's another story!

It is true that it is difficult to love those who are close to us. It is those who are close to us who can get to us to irritate us. The ordinary encounters we make with nasty baggage-handlers and bell boys we can easily pass off. They do not bother us because they are remote from us. But the ones who are near to us, if they mistreat us, we find it difficult to show love. But this is the test of true love.

Can you love those that are near you, those that are your brethren? Well, if you cannot, you remain in death, for this is the mark of new life.

In February, I was privileged to be in Bellingham, Washington, at a conference of non-Christian couples meeting together. We had a wonderful time presenting the story of the gospel in a very simple and open way to these couples. This last week I received a letter from one of those couples, telling of their reactions during the week. At the end of the week they had made a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ, but they did not say anything to anyone at the time. Later, when they went home with the couple that had brought them, they acknowledged to them that they had come to faith in Jesus Christ. They wrote me to tell me about this and to thank me for being an instrument of God in bringing the gospel to them. Then they added a *P.S.* that set my heart to rejoicing. In one line they said:

P.S: Our two younger children, sensing the change in us, have asked to become Christians too.

That is the mark of new life -- a change, the change of love. Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you have love one to another," {cf, John 13:35}. Now, because there are many attempts to imitate this valuable quality, John goes on to trace for us the essence of love.

By this we know love, that he [and it is as though the Lord Jesus is standing right there, and he points to him, 'that one'] **laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. {1 Jn 3:16 RSV}**

That is the essence of true love. It is a laying down of life, a giving up of self-interest; that is the quality that marks God's kind of love. "He laid down his life for us," John says. That was a once-for-all laying down, and he uses the aorist tense here which asserts that. Once-for-all he poured out his soul unto death, laid down his life for us. Now, because of that, we ought to be laying down (and here he uses the present continuous tense) our lives for each other, our brethren. Not in the same way he did for we cannot die for another, but we can live for one another. The "laying down" here means the giving up of self-interest, the voluntary surrender of the right to meet our own needs in order that we might meet the needs of another. It is the giving up of self in order that we might minister to another. That is the quality that marks genuine love. As he goes on to show, it will manifest itself, not in word, but in deed.

...if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? {1 Jn 3:17 RSV}

That is not God's love. If we can see others in need -- physically, emotionally, or spiritually -- and pass them by unconcerned, then all our words and our fine talk about love are as Paul says nothing but "a clanging cymbal" {1 Cor 13:1 RSV}, a loud noise, a mere banging upon metal.

Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth. {1 Jn 3:18 RSV}

It is this easy talk about love but an actual withdrawing from contact with those who are in need that constitutes the phoniness that is so widespread in evangelical circles and which is turning so many away from Christ.

On the way home from my trip I stopped off at a Christian College where several of us talked with hundreds of students there. In so many cases we found them reflecting an attitude of disinterest and even

burning resentment against Christianity. Why? Because, as they put it, "it's nothing but a fellowship of phoney's." I pointed out to some of them that they were as phoney as the ones they were complaining about. But what they had to say was often all too true. The great sickness of fundamentalism lies right here. We have talked much about love. We have uttered glowing words about God's love for us, and our love for men, but we have built barriers of isolation around ourselves, and refused to let others see our inner lives, and refused to seek out and find them. Because we have become isolated units, refusing to blend hearts together, we have lost the glory of body-life through which Jesus Christ intends to manifest the glory of his Spirit at work. God only works through a body, and therefore it is absolutely essential that we:

Take down these isolating barriers, and stop pretending to be something we are not; to be willing to admit our faults and our failures, and to pray together, and to stop being critical and judgmental, pointing the finger at those among us who fall or stumble, and gathering our skirts of righteousness about ourselves to pass by on the other side, lest we be contaminated by them. That is phoniness. John says so, does he not?

If you see a brother in need, and you shut your heart against him, and go on in your isolated way, how does God's love abide in you? It is but talk, it is word, but it is not deed. Therefore, comes the exhortation, "Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth." When this special kind of love which is not based upon the loveableness of an individual, but loves for Christ's sake, and puts up with difficulties and irritating qualities about another, is shown, it becomes the most powerful force in all the world. When it is seen, it hits with amazing impact.

Yesterday I heard a young Jewish convert give the story of his life. It is a most amazing story:

His name is Arthur Katz and he is a teacher in the public schools in Berkeley. He was raised as an atheist, even though he was of Jewish descent. Early in his life he became a Marxist, a committed Communist. He was always a left-wing radical, a trouble maker, at the heart of every uprising that was going on.

At the close of World War II he happened to be in Germany with the American Army and personally saw the gas chambers at Dachau and Buchenwald. He came away from them shocked and sick at heart, filled with hatred, first toward the German race, and then, realizing that this was not merely a national problem but a human problem, filled with an all-pervading sense of disgust and loathing for the whole human race. He came back to Berkeley and tried to give himself to education, but more and more he realized that education was not the answer. Education could not change hearts, education could not and did not touch the basic problems of human beings. Finally he gave it all up and resigned his position. His wife lost her mind, and was put in a mental institution. Divorced, footloose, and fancy-free, he went out to wander up and down the face of the earth, hardly knowing where he was going.

One rainy wet day he was in Greece, hitchhiking, with a week's growth of beard upon his face, and a dirty rucksack on his back, standing in the wind and the rain thumbing a ride. Of course, no one wanted to pick him up. He stood there for hours when at last a big Cadillac came by, and stopped.

To his amazement the man did not merely open the door and gesture for him to get in; he got out of his car, came around, and began to pump his hand and to welcome him as though he were some kind of king. He took the dirty rucksack and threw it on the clean upholstery. Art said he winced himself when he saw that. Then the man invited him to get in the car, and they drove on. The man treated him as though he were a welcome guest. Art Katz could not understand this. He was taken to a hotel and the man bought him a room and cleaned him up and gave him some food.

Finally he asked him what he was doing, and where he was going. There came pouring out of this young Jewish atheist all the pent-up heartache, misery, and resentment of his life. He told him the whole thing, just pouring it all out. The man sat and listened, and when he was all through, he spoke one sentence. He said, "You know, Art, what the world needs? -- those who are willing to wash one another's feet." Art Katz said, "I never heard anything more beautiful than that. Why do you say that?" And the man said, "Because that's what

my Lord did."

For the first time in this young atheist's life he heard a Christian witness. That was the beginning of the end.

I do not have time to tell the whole story of how this young man came to know Jesus Christ. But the thing that arrested him and broke through all the years of hatred, all the pent-up resentment and bitterness of his heart and life was one act of kindness which manifested to an apparently undeserving young man, genuine courtesy and kindness in the name of Jesus Christ. "By this," Jesus said, "shall all men know that you are my disciples," {John 13:35 RSV}. That is the path of love. If life is there, that kind of love will be there. Now, let it show, is John's exhortation. "Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth."

Prayer:

Our Father, may these words come home to our own hearts with great power. May we realize that we are not to love others because they love us, we are not to be kind to people because they are kind to us, we are not to be friendly to other people because they show some friendship back to us; but a Christian is to love because he has been loved by God, and he has in him a life which loves despite any reason to love. Grant to us that we may let that life show. Let us respond to the feelings that well up within us from you, to the impulses to be kind, to be courteous. Make us quick, Lord, to respond to these. We ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who loved us with that kind of love, Amen.

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