

LOVE MADE VISIBLE

by Ray C. Stedman

Who will deny that love is the dominant theme of the age in which we live? Everyone talks about love, though not everyone practices it. A kind friend sent me a recent survey conducted by a team of professional pollsters, asking the question, "What do people love the most in life?" Categories were children, animals, God, the United States, their enemies, and themselves. It was discovered that 92% of the people said they loved children, barely edging out God at 86%. The United States, surprisingly enough, came third at 75%; animals were fourth, at 66%. Only 33% would acknowledge loving themselves (fifth place), and only 20% confessed to loving their enemies, all of which probably reveals that Americans love surveys most of all, and understand themselves least of all.

The Christian faith has always emphasized preeminently two very important things -- truth and love. Jesus Christ himself was the preeminent expression of both of these -- truth and love -- held in perfect balance. He was fully the expression of truth, and fully the expression of love. Therefore Christianity, which is but the expression of his life in the world, is, to use that wonderful expression of the Apostle Paul, to be an experience of "truthing in love." That is the literal rendering of the phrase which Paul uses in Ephesians, translated in our Authorized Version, "speaking the truth in love," {Eph 4:15 KJV}. Literally it is "truthing in love," living the truth in love. This is what Christianity is to be.

Now, we have studied, from time to time, the tactics of the devil in this modern world by which he seeks to overthrow and disrupt Christian faith. We have discovered that one of the most commonly employed tactics of the enemy is simply to overemphasize a truth, to make it a half-truth, or a completely distorted aspect of truth. This is what the devil does in this matter of truth and love. All he needs to do in order to distort Christianity is to produce the one without the other. Any survey of our present world will indicate how successfully he has done this.

To emphasize love at the expense of truth is to produce what is usually called liberalism, with its blindness to the hard realities of sin and evil in human life, and its glowing proclamations of sweetness and light. On the other hand, to emphasize truth at the expense of love, produces a cold, hard, legalistic fundamentalism which, though it holds to the right creed, is as empty of genuine Christian life as is the former. Increasingly, I meet individuals whose Christian faith has been sorely shaken, if not completely disrupted, by exposure to vicious attack and railing abuse from certain Christians who are self-appointed defenders of the faith and accusers of the brethren. In the light of what the Apostle John has to say to us now, beginning with Verse 7 of Chapter 4, this kind of conduct on the part of professed Christians raises serious questions about the genuineness of their faith:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. {1 Jn 4:7-8 RSV}

Three times in the passage immediately surrounding this, the phrase "love one another" occurs. It is here in Verse 7, also in Verse 11 ("Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another"), and in Verse 12 ("No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us..."). Obviously, the primary exhortation here is this three-fold repetition, "love one another."

The nature of this love is inherent in the very statement John makes. "Love one another," he says. Thereby it is indicated that love is not to be only for those who are pleasant to us, or who are nice, congenial, clever people. We are not to love because people are lovable, but because each is another.

Every one is a person, capable of a unique relationship to God, and therefore not a *thing* to be dealt with impersonally, or to be opposed or accepted as it suits our purpose, but a living, breathing, searching creation of God, just like us. That is why we are to love one another, without regard to what that person is like. This defines what love is meant when the Bible talks about love. True love is an interest in and a concern for another person, just because he is a person, and for no other reason. It does not matter whether he is rich or poor, black or white, old or young, male or female, Republican or Democrat; it makes absolutely no difference. He or she is a person. A high school girl said recently:

"You know, all my life I've been doing like everyone else. I've been kind to my friends, and polite to strangers, and nasty to all those I didn't like, until it suddenly dawned on me that Christians are not to be kind only to those who are nice to them, or to their friends, but Christians are to be kind to everyone because they are people, and because we're Christians."

That puts it exactly. That is what love is. It takes no notice of what a person is like, or what he does, or how he dresses, or how he looks, or anything about his background. It sees one thing only, and that is, "Here is another person, another one like me with all the longings, the heartaches, the searchings, the problems, the aspirations, the hopes, dreams, and frustrations of life like me. Here is another one, struggling as I am to face the problems of life. What can I do to help?" That is love.

In these two verses we have this great exhortation to love one another because, as John marvelously declares, that kind of love can only originate with God. This kind of love is "of God." In fact, God *is* this kind of love, God *is* love. Therefore, wherever the life of God is present that love is found. And if that love is not found, the life of God is not present. The argument is clear, is it not? It is so simple. It is no good claiming that you know God if the love of God is not found in your life. If you cannot treat people objectively and see through the irritating qualities that may offend you to be nice to them because they are in need of love; If your reaction to those who offend you is one of opposition, rejection, and instant antagonism; Then it is no good saying you belong to him. That is not God's life, that is not God's love. John's argument is, if the life of God is present in us, then the love of God will be there too.

Now, here we come face to face with that tremendous declaration of the Scriptures, "God is love." As John R. W. Stott says, "This is the most comprehensive and sublime of all the biblical affirmations of God's being." It means that at the root of all God does is love. No matter how difficult it may appear to us, the fountain from which all God's activity stems is this kind of self-giving love. Even his judgments, his condemnations, arrive from love. We need to understand this. Judgment is not something separate from love. If you convince me that a holy, loving God cannot judge an evil being, then you will also convince me that he cannot love him. It is inherent in the quality of love to be antagonistic to that which opposes the thing loved. You see that in every mother. Attack a child with the mother present and see how that mother-love flames out in immediate resentment, opposition, and antagonism to all that threatens her loved one. God's love is the same. Inherent in it is the quality of judgment. God is a purifying fire, consuming and burning away the dross in order that he might preserve the gold. That, incidentally, is how the book of Hebrews describes him. "Our God is a consuming fire," {Heb 12:29}. Love is not always easy to live with because of that very quality, yet it is the most attractive and wonderful thing in the world because of its warmth and its all-embracing inclusiveness that takes in all kinds and all conditions, without looking for merit on the part of the object loved. That is the love of God.

Dr. H. A. Ironside used to tell of a woman who came to him and said, "I don't have any use for the Bible and for all this Christian superstition. It's enough for me to know that God is love." He said to her, "Well, do you know that?" She said, "Of course I know that, I've known it all my life." "Well," he said, "do you think that everyone knows that?" "Oh, yes," she said, "everyone knows God is love." "Well," he said, "do you think that woman over in India, who is persuaded by her religion to take her little child and

throw it into the river as an offering to the crocodiles, has any concept or idea that God is love?" She said, "Well, no, but that's mere superstition." "Do you think that that savage in Africa, bowing down to his idols of wood and stone, trembling with fear lest they should strike back at him and destroy his crops and take away his children and even injure his own person, do you think he has any idea that God is love?" he asked. She said, "No, but in every civilized country we know that God is love." "Well," he said, "how do we know that? How do we know that God is love? Do the ancients teach this? Do the other religions of earth teach that God is love, and show that God is love? Let me tell you something. Do you know that the only reason we know that God is love is because he sent his Son and manifested himself as love? The book that tells about the Lord Jesus Christ is the only book in the world that contains the idea that the God behind all created matter is a God of love? Creation reveals his power, his greatness, and his might, but there is nothing in nature that says, 'God is love.' The only way we know it is that God manifested his love in the giving of his Son." And John moves on to declare this in Verses 9 and 10:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. {1 Jn 4:9-10 RSV}

Note again the character of love, what kind of love it is. It is love for the unlovely. "God so loved the world..." {John 3:16a}. What world? Why, the world that you and I are part of. The world made up of men and women like you, like me. The world that consists of the people who fill the pages of our newspapers with the ugly reports that are so abounding these days. Some time ago a mother said to me, "I've come to the place where I almost hate my son." Why? The evil in her own son had turned her against him. The evil in him had so offended her, that which was ugly and wrong in him had loomed as such a frightful thing, that she had found her love almost turned to hate. Some time ago a husband and wife who were in my study for counseling became so angry that the husband in rage stood up, and, right in my presence, spat in his wife's face. Yet he had promised to love, honor and cherish her until death shall them part. Why would he do such a thing? Well, because the evil and ugliness of sin in his wife (though he was not seeing the same in his own life) so enraged him that he struck out against it. It offended him. It was repulsive, revolting to him.

How angry we get sometimes at the stubbornness and insolence of others, the rudeness and hate that is manifested toward us. It makes our blood boil and our tempers rise, we burn and writhe within. Why? Well, that is what evil does, that is how ugly it is. Yet that evil is in every single heart of those born of Adam. It is constantly revealing itself to the eyes of God. It may be hidden away from others, and even from our own eyes, but God, who sees all things, sees the whole world of men in all their blatant ugliness and evil. And what is his response? Is it anger? Is it rejection? Is it judgment? Did he pour out the fires of wrath upon a world so repulsively ugly as that? Oh, no. He responded with the most costly of all loves: He gave himself, he sent his Son. In the Person of his Son, God himself came and lived among us and died upon a cross of shame in the very world his hands had made.

Why? As John says, "that we might live through him." Is that not love? Does that not grip you? He did it that all the chains of fear, hate and evil which bind us and shackle us might be broken, these powerful forces within us might be subdued and brought into control, and quarreling, bickering, and abuse might cease between human beings. That is why he came. That it all might be replaced, not by negative nothingness, but by patience, acceptance, and the power to remain calm -- "in order that we might live." Now that is the measure of love. John says if you want to measure love, use that as your standard. Do not measure love by the warm affection of your heart toward God, the gratitude you feel toward God. Naturally, if God has blessed you, helped you, and strengthened you, you will feel a warm affection toward him arising within you, but that is not the measure of love. God is altogether lovable, so do not define love as that quality of warmth and gratitude which rises up when you meet a lovable and lovely

person. That is not love. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiration for our sins." That is the sign of love. Stamped forever in human history, the greatest sign of love is a bloody cross. If you have ever been to that cross and seen the love of God manifested there, you never can go back to a life of selfish indulgence and quarreling behavior.

Will you notice, in Verse 10, the linking of love and expiation? There are those who tell us that God's love is comparable to that of an indulgent grandfather, that he loves us so much that he will let us get away with anything. He will forgive it solely on the basis of his kindness to us. He will not demand an accounting, nor will his love ever insist on any punishment, but it is of the kind that says, "That's all right, just forget it." No, no. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us, and" What? -- "sent his Son to be the expiation [a propitiation] for our sins." He came to satisfy justice, to meet the demands of a broken Law, to pay the full debt, to satisfy the penalty. It all must be met; it cannot be ignored. God's love is also just -- love must be just -- and therefore, the only love that is worth talking about is a love that satisfies justice.

Remember, we saw earlier in First John that love must be this. Love that satisfies justice -- that is, righteousness. It is not mere sentiment poured out as indulgence upon someone, letting him have what he wants, or do what he likes, and paying all his bills. That is not love. It is love that satisfies justice. That alone is righteousness. Now, in this last pair of Verses 11 and 12, we will see a declaration of the possibility of this kind of love among us, and also the perfectibility of it:

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. {1 Jn 4:11-12 RSV}

Verse 11 is the answer to every lame excuse on our part which says, "Oh, I just can't love that person. You don't know what she's like. If you had to live with her (or him) as I have to, you wouldn't be able to love her, either." No, no. "Beloved, if God so loved us ..." If you have experienced this kind of love, if you have been to the cross and have felt the overwhelming cleansing of God's love for you, despite the antagonism and hatefulness you have shown him, and your loving of your own way and wanting to do what you like; if you have felt the cleansing grace of God wiping that all out without any recriminations or calling up of the past, forgetting and forgiving it all, then as John says, you not only can love someone else but you "ought to" -- you owe it. That is where the word *ought* comes from: owe it. You "owe it" to love one another.

This is why Paul could say in Romans 1, "I am a debtor to every man," {cf, Rom 1:14}. I owe something to everybody. And he himself said later on in that very epistle, "Owe no man anything, save to love one another," {Rom 13:8 KJV}. We owe it, because we have within us the fountain of love in the life of God. Now if you do not have the life of God, of course, you cannot love one another like this. Do not try -- admit that you cannot. Above all, do not come up with the shabby, shoddy, sleazy imitation of love that is nice to another's face and cuts him to death behind his back. That is not love. Or merely to tolerate another for a time. That is not love. Unless you have the life of God, you cannot love. But if you have the life of God -- that is the whole point -- you can love like this and you ought to do it. God, in you, can love through you and will love through you. All he is waiting for is the acquiescence of your will, your willingness to love; then he will do the loving. So, beloved, "if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" with this kind of unjudging love, not basing it on the qualities we see in the other person, but loving just because he is a person.

Verse 12 declares a great and daring concept: It recognizes that God is invisible and no man has ever seen God. How true this is. Even in the Old Testament days, though there appeared manifestations of God in human form, these were but God in human disguise. It was not God made visible. There is a sense in which it is possible to say, I have never seen you, and you have never seen me. You see this

tabernacle, this shabby, rather tattered tent in which I live. But you have not seen me, and I have not seen you. Men, like God, are spirits and invisible. I can feel the force of your personality, and I can certainly see that there is a spirit living in that tent you are in, but I have not seen you, and you have not seen me. So no man has ever seen God, at any time. God is a Spirit, and therefore invisible. Thus the love of God cannot be demonstrated in nature, cannot be made visible in God's creation.

Well, where is it made visible? John says, "If we love one another. God abides in us and his love is perfected," i.e., reaches its final end, "in us." That is where men see God's love, and it is the only place it can be seen. The fact of an indwelling God becomes visible only when we manifest love one to another, the kind of love that we have been talking about. As long as we are nice only to our friends or to those who are nice to us, no one has any idea that God is around. But when we start being nice to those who are nasty to us, when we start returning good for evil, when we start being patient, tender, thoughtful and considerate of those who are stubborn, obstinate, and selfish, and say difficult things to us, then people get the sense that God is somewhere around, close at hand, that he is in the situation. Then God's dwelling in us becomes visible to them. Men today are not acquainted very much with the *Gospel according to Matthew*, or Luke, or John, but every man is somewhere reading the *Gospel according to You*. If they cannot read it clearly, it is because there is not much manifestation of the love of God in your life as a Christian. But it is there, if God's life is there. So the appeal of the Apostle John is, "let us" do this. This is not an automatic thing; it demands also the agreement of our will: Let us deliberately love one another. Let us make channels for this love to be manifested. Let us allow it to be expressed in deliberate activities of kindness, thoughtfulness and consideration, one to another, and of understanding, patience and tolerance of each other's views. And then note what he says here. The result is such a daring thing that actually some of the commentators are so staggered by it they refuse to accept what it says.

What John says is that God's love, this love pouring out from this amazing Being whose concern for the vast millions on earth is individual, each one wrapped in his amazing love; this love is perfected, only when it becomes visible in us. Is that not amazing? God's love reaches its ultimate and final conclusion when it becomes visible in us. It is an abortive thing, incomplete, and, therefore, unreachable, incomprehensible, until it finds its manifestation in a living human being, in flesh and blood, incarnate again in you and me. Here is a world dying for love. The word is on everyone's lips, they are talking about it on every side, thereby indicating the vast, surging hunger of the heart. And we are the only channels by which the love the world is searching for can ever be loosed among humanity. Therefore, brethren, above all else, put on love. Let us love one another and be known as people who love one another. For, your concern for another, or my concern for another, completes God.

Prayer:

What a barren world this is, our Father, apart from the manifestation of the great warmth of love. How empty life would be if this great quality were withdrawn. And yet how true are these words of the apostle, you alone are the source of this love, the only kind that satisfies, the only kind that meets the clamant hunger of the heart. So, in this moment, our Father, we pray that these words may burn themselves into our hearts, and that we may recognize ourselves as called preeminently, above all else, to this great task of being a demonstration, an abundant demonstration, of this kind of love. We ask that you will help us to take it seriously, and to begin to reflect this immediately. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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