

## THE ART OF LOVING PEOPLE

"Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God" (I John 4:7).

What factor or influence or circumstance is most important in making us what we are? Psychologists and students of human nature would give various answers to that question, but, perhaps, all of them would agree that, at least, one thing plays an important role in every human life. That one thing is the interesting and indefinable phenomenon which we call love.

All of us know something about love. We have been in love, or we are in love, or we hope to be in love. All of us are conscious of the fact that love changes lives.

There is a love whose depth we cannot understand or measure. There is a love that rises above all human love as the mountain stands beside the mole hill. "Greater love hath no man that this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). That is the kind of love which I can comprehend. But, when love goes beyond that boundary, I stand amazed, unable to take it in, unable to explain it. And yet, more than nineteen centuries ago, atop the hill called Golgotha, pure, undiluted, perfect love found its vehicle. In the drama of Calvary love laid its heart bare. The love of God, as expressed at Calvary, is greater than any human love. Christ died on the cross for one great all-encompassing reason, namely, He loved sinners.

It is impossible to put into words what the love of God actually means, and what it does. Words are such feeble agents to convey thoughts that loom far out beyond the finite mind.

A little boy was doing his chores about the house one day, and he began to think that perhaps he wasn't being paid enough for what he was doing. And so, he made out a bill to give to his mother. He wrote it out. "For mowing the lawn, fifty cents. For going to the store, ten cents. For drying dishes, fifteen cents." And so on, until down at the bottom of his column were the words, "Total, one dollar." He put the piece of paper on his mother's plate at the supper table.

The mother picked up the paper and read it without a word, putting it away in her apron pocket. The next evening, when the little fellow came in to supper, there was a piece of paper on his plate. He read it, and this is what it said:

"For fixing you three meals a day every day of your life: No charge. For washing and ironing your clothes every week of the nine years of your life: No charge. For sitting up with you all night last winter when you had the scarlet fever: No charge. For going down into the valley of the shadow of death that you might have life: No charge. Total: I love you."

Don't you see the point? Here we stand, surrounded by the mess and filth of our sin, shaking our little fists at God, and saying, "Give me! Give me! Give me!" And back there comes the quiet voice of the Eternal to say, "For giving you the breath you take, the heart beat that sustains life, the body in which you dwell: No charge. For giving you sunshine and rain, beauty, and light, friendship and loved ones: No charge. For going down into the valley of the shadow of Calvary that you might have life: No charge. Total: I love you!"

God loves you, and that makes all the difference in the world. You are loved of God. Think what that means. If you are loved of God, there is no problem too big, no night too long, no barrier too high, no sorrow too pressing, that it cannot be overcome. A man whom God loves can rise above all circumstances, trouble and sin, and can live victoriously and enjoy the abundant life. And that is exactly what the God Who loves you wants you to do!

So far as we can see and understand, God loves in only one way. His love is always a redemptive love. The whole purpose of His love is to redeem, to transform, to lift, to change and to make over. His love is like the white hot flame that plays upon the molten metal, making it pliable and formable so that it can be shaped into patterns of beauty and usefulness. When a man stands in the shadow of Calvary and the love of God comes to bear upon him, he is no longer the same man. Paul said, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation" (II Corinthians 5:17). The redemptive love of Christ can make you over.

If you will stand at the foot of the cross at Calvary, and catch a glimpse of the compassionate and loving eyes of Christ, and see the blood that falls from His wounded head, His pierced hands and feet, and hear the drops of blood as they fall into the sands below, each of them will say to you: "I love you. I love you. God cares for you." That fact changes darkness into light, failure into success, sorrow into joy, and death into life.

"I stand amazed in the presence  
Of Jesus the Nazarene,  
And wonder how He could love me,  
A sinner, condemned, unclean.

How marvelous! How wonderful!  
And my song shall ever be;  
How marvelous! How wonderful!  
Is my Saviour's love for me!"

It is marvelous, and it is wonderful. But you can never know how marvelous and how wonderful until you stand within the circle of that love, until you have let go and let God have His way, until you have truly surrendered yourself to Him. In that moment you will know that there is no greater love.

Certain well-known Greek words have been translated "love," namely, eros, phileo and agape. Eros is the word which was used ordinarily in classical Greek by the philosophers and mythologists for love between the sexes. It implied sexual desire and lust. So base were its associations that the Christian writers shrank from the use of the word. Phileo means a kindly feeling or a warm affection for another, as in the case of a relative or friend. Agape is the word which was used for a higher and an all-absorbing type of love. This word is used both for God's love for us and our love for Him. It is an affection of adoration and devotion, rather than a frothy, effervescent emotion that boils over with cheap sentimentality. It expresses the feeling which we are to cherish towards God and towards others. Such love is born of God. It cannot be pumped out of the heart of a person who is not a Christian because it is not there.

Human love, at its best, can be and is a beautiful and wonderful thing. In the love of a man for a woman, or a man for his child, or a man for his friend one seems to catch some echo of divine love.

Let us then look at divine love, agape, in contradistinction to human love, eros. Divine love is spontaneous and uncaused. Just as it is the nature of the sun to shine, so it is the nature of God to love. "God is love." This is something quite different from human love. In human love there is always that in the object of our affections which awakens or calls forth or causes our love. Thus we love some people and we do not love others. That, we say, is quite natural and human, and so indeed it is. But the love of God is not like that by any manner of means. In telling us that we should love our enemies, Christ drew an illustration from God, Who makes His sun to shine on the evil as on the good and sends His rain on the just as on the unjust. Divine love is indifferent to human merit. This outgoing love of God for all men regardless of merit was one of the lines of demarcation between Christianity and Judaism and between Christianity and Greek culture.

I suppose that it is because the love of God is not based on merit is why Paul said that it "passeth knowledge." It passeth knowledge to ask us to love our enemies, and yet that is exactly what Christ has commanded us to do. "I say unto you, love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, pray for them that despitefully use you." But how can a man love his enemies? He cannot love them in a human way, if love is connected with merit or desire. For what has my enemy, who hates me, who tries to harm me, who wishes me ill, done to merit my love -- what is there appealing or attractive about him to awaken my affections? Nothing whatsoever, and so I cannot love him, humanly speaking. But men have loved their enemies, men have done good to those who would do them evil, men have prayed for those who would despitefully use them; but that has been done not out of any human feeling or sentiment, but from resolute good will which comes from experiencing and sharing the love of God which has been shed abroad in our hearts. "This is my commandment, that ye love one another even as I have loved you."

"A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35). "These things I command you, that ye love one another" (John 15:17). "For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another" (I John 3:11). "And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment" (I John 3:23). "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God" (I John 4:7).

To love one another is to appropriate the divine ideal of life, "for love is of God." True love is not something which can be stored away like furs in the summertime; it cannot be confined in a finely wrought case like a precious jewel; it is not a mental abstraction to be discussed and weighed in the balances of argument. It is more than an idea to be wrought into a story and printed in a book. Love is more than an attitude, more than a gentle sentiment, and more than a tender thought. Love is a living thing; it is a force whose existence cannot be concealed. It is like a mountain spring which runs with blessing and refreshment into the valleys; it is like a fire which cannot be smothered. It is like the morning sun whose rising no power can resist, and whose light all but the evil-doers welcome. "Beloved let us love one another." Do you see the mutuality of it? Love begets love -- "Let us love one another." Let us fashion our lives so as to make it easy for others to love us, by loving them; thus life will become easier for all. Most of the irritating things

in life are soluble by love. Some things do not yield to love, nor change their nature in response to its appeal, but most of them will. We may not be lovely or lovable, but we can be loving, and that will make us lovely and lovable. It is easier to find in anybody ground for criticism than it is to find the basis for love, but still let us love one another.

Bring all of the world's great names together and review their deeds of glory, and you will discover that their supreme achievement was in loving one another.

Napoleon said to Montholon at St. Helena, "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and myself, have founded empires; but upon what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ alone founded his empire upon love; and at this moment millions of men would die for Him. I die before my time, and my body will be given back to worms. Such is the fate of him who has been called the great Napoleon -- what an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal kingdom of Christ, which is proclaimed, loved and adored, and which is extended over the whole earth! Call you this dying? Is it not rather living? The death of Christ is the death of a God!"

The great Napoleon had subdued kingdoms and swept Europe as a mighty conqueror, but recognized that he had lost all because he had not loved all. Left to ourselves it were easier to be a Napoleon than to be a Christian; it is easier to destroy life than to preserve it.

Christ said: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love Thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31). "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." What does that mean? How are we to regard self-love -- is it a vice; is it a virtue?

As infants we are concerned primarily for ourselves. The awareness of our personal needs is all that matters in the beginning. If a baby wakes up in the middle of the night and is hungry, this fact is the only thing that is important to him. The child does not stop to consider if his mother is worn out or his father has a hard day coming up and needs sleep. His own needs are paramount, and this is exclusive in his thinking. And, while this egocentricity may be somewhat modified as a child grows older, it continues to be the pattern of existence, and if somewhere along the line it is not challenged, it can become a permanent way of life.

If you will start down the list of obvious sins, you will find that in each case this attitude of self-centeredness and self-concern is the common soil out of which all of them grew. Why do men steal? Because they want things for themselves and are willing to take them forcibly from others rather than work and earn them. Why do people commit adultery? Because they want to satisfy their appetites or enhance their egos at the expense of others. Why do men kill? Because they are determined to assert themselves over others in utmost destructiveness.

Realizing these things, one may switch from loving himself more than his neighbor to loving himself less than his neighbor. In neither of these

attitudes is one obedient to the command of Christ, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Love of self and love of neighbor are not alternatives to each other. Christ teaches that our love for others and our love for self are to be the same. God loves that human being called "self" just as much as He loves that human being called "thy neighbor." The two are of equal value in the sight of God. To hate self or to hate another person, one ignores God's evaluation and sets out to destroy that which is of great value to God. Each one is called to work for the fulfillment and well-being of one's own life and of the life of his neighbor.

Christ commands one thing -- not that we love our neighbors either more or less than we love ourselves, but as we love ourselves. The way God loves every other person is the way He loves us, and He calls us to imitate Himself at this point. Love of self as an end in itself is a vice, but love of self as a means toward God's purpose is a virtue. Do not exalt yourself above your neighbor. Do not despise yourself beneath your neighbor. But love yourself as you love your neighbor, realizing that this is exactly how God loves you both.

Love is our greatest lack and greatest need as children of God. First and foremost, we need love for God. Are you willing, out of love for God, to trust Him fully and to obey Him absolutely? Our first need is a real love for our Lord.

Many years ago a Chinese lady went to England in order to take back to China with her a band of British womenfolk who would teach the Chinese about Jesus Christ. She went up and down Britain, but the response was very disappointing. One day her servant came into her room, and found her sobbing bitterly; and the Chinese lady said this: "It is no good. We shall have to go back home without them; they do not love their Jesus enough." Ah, that is it! We do not love the Lord Jesus enough to be willing, for His sake, to trust and obey Him for all that He has in Himself for us.

Our second need is love for our fellow-believers. The New Testament teaches that, in the heart of every child in the family of God, there should be a peculiar and special love for every other member of the family. There is a peculiar love that we ought to have for one another because of our mutual Redeemer.

Our Lord said that this love that we have one for another is our one distinct characteristic in the eyes of the world. "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another." Yet I suppose that every Christian work is having its fellowship spoiled, its worship hindered, its testimony impaired because of the lack of love between Christian people. Instead of withering our love in an atmosphere of criticism and unkindness, let us cultivate love in our hearts, and love one another as Christ has loved us.