

Christ's Most Difficult Command

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”

—Matthew 5:43,44

THIS PASSAGE IN THE

Gospel of Matthew deserves our greatest attention. There is perhaps no other passage in the New Testament that sums up the heart and attitude of the Christian as well as this one. These verses talk about the most powerful testimony one can have in his life, when Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” A noted historian, Will Durant, was once asked how he would sum up the Christian ethic, and he

said, “Basically, it’s love your enemies.” Without a doubt, our Lord set the highest standards possible in all aspects of life, but this command is the most

difficult to achieve for those striving to develop the “mind of Christ.”

THE LORD’S STANDARDS

In the Sermon on the Mount, there are two statements that sum up the standards of those who claim to be followers of Christ. One is found in Matthew 5:47: “What do ye more than others?” Even those who do not profess Christianity love those who treat them well. Jesus was saying that if one professes to be a Christian, something should make him different than others. The second statement is in Matthew 6:8: “Be not ye therefore like unto them.” The simple lesson of this statement is that the followers of Christ are not to conform themselves to the thoughts and actions of the world in general. In these two statements, Jesus was pointing out that his standards were much higher than those of anyone else in the world around him.

The Pharisees were generally thought to have the highest religious standards during the time of Jesus’ First Advent, but they were not high enough. The Master said, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:20) By this statement, Jesus showed that his standard was higher than any human standard, even that of the scribes and Pharisees. Those religious leaders had many laws, ceremonies, and rituals. They were considered the most religious people of their time, yet they came well short of the righteous standards of God.

The highest human standards have always fallen far short of God’s perfection. This was the case not

only during New Testament times, but also is borne out in the Old Testament narrative. In both cases, God called his chosen people to a higher standard. As an example, after rescuing his people Israel from Egyptian bondage, he made a covenant with them saying, "I am the LORD your God, . . . after the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I bring you, shall ye not do: neither shall ye walk in their ordinances [customs or manners]. Ye shall do my judgments, and keep mine ordinances, to walk therein: I am the LORD your God." (Lev. 18:2-4) God was telling his people that his standards, which they were to follow, were higher than those of the people in the land to which they would be brought.

Since God had made a covenant with Israel, they were his chosen people. As antitypical "Israelites indeed," the Lord's people today are, as Peter says, "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." (I Pet. 2:9) Thus, we are to be totally different from all others. We are to follow God's commandments and live by the highest standard known—God's standard. This is most difficult, as we all know. To live separate from the world's ideas and standards means we must be continually looking toward higher goals in the conduct of our lives. However, this must be done to the best of our ability if we are to inherit the kingdom promised to the overcomers.

We read from I John 2:15-17, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is

not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.” We note in these verses the three standards of the world in general—love of the flesh, love of what the eyes see, and the pride of life. These are the fallen standards with which all spiritual Israelites must continually battle.

As recorded in Leviticus 18, the Israelites kept forgetting their uniqueness and continually fell into sin. The Prophet Balaam said of them, “The people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.” (Num. 23:9) Although it was God’s desire that Israel dwell alone and not mingle with other nations, they emulated most of the heathen practices around them. Psalm 106:35 says that the Israelites did not destroy the idolatrous nations in their midst, “but were mingled [mixed] among the heathen, and learned their works.” This was a sad commentary as to their lack of obedience to God’s will.

LOWERING GOD’S STANDARDS

It is possible that the same snares into which natural Israel fell may also befall us, as we endeavor to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Instead of following the high standards of God, we may attempt to change them. Hence, we must examine ourselves carefully along this line. We can dilute God’s standards in various ways. We may overlook what the Bible says, thinking that it is not of critical importance in a given situation. We may use the mantle

of love to go against the clear teachings of God. This is, of course, not to say that we should not love. However, we must be careful not to use love to obscure what God says in his Word.

If we find any indication of such tendencies in our lives, we must remember that we have a wily Adversary who makes darkness appear as light, and light as darkness. Paul said, concerning Satan, "We are not ignorant of his devices." (II Cor. 2:11) One of these devices is the attempt to gloss over sins with the mantle of love. This is a very subtle temptation. The Apostle Paul sharply rebuked the Corinthian brethren for not properly addressing a situation within their fellowship involving immorality which they thought could be overlooked by simply exercising love. (I Cor. 5:2,6) To believe that God overlooks all of our failings under the mantle of love is a subtle device of the Adversary.

In I Samuel 8:19,20, we read that the Israelites wanted a king in order to be like other nations. "We will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations." They even went so far as to say, "We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone." (Ezek. 20:32) This was displeasing to God, and he sent prophets to remind Israel that they were to be different. "Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen." "Defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt." (Jer. 10:2; Ezek. 20:7) In these statements, the prophets pleaded continuously with Israel to maintain the high standards given to them by God. This same plea was made to the Israelites during Jesus' First Advent, and it still applies today. God expects his people to be different from those in the world around them.

The standard Jesus presents in Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies,” is not popular today. This is because it is not an earthly standard, but one that is unique to God and his Son. It is a far greater ethic than any of us can keep without help from our Heavenly Father. However, it is the standard to which we must adhere. We read in Matthew 5:48, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” To be “perfect,” as used in this verse, means to be complete and mature. This means we must set our standards after the pattern of Christ Jesus our Lord, who followed the example and pattern of his Heavenly Father.

Throughout his sermon on the mount, Jesus showed the Pharisees that their system was sub-standard, and warned that unless they would come and learn of him, they would never be able to live by his standards. As religious as they claimed to be, and as legalistic as was their thinking, yet they could not qualify to be part of the Heavenly Kingdom. They thought it was enough to perform the acts of the Law, such as not to commit adultery, but Christ told them that one who even thought about it “in his heart” was guilty of the same sin. (Matt. 5:27-30) Similarly, the Pharisees thought it was acceptable to get a divorce if all the legal paperwork was complete, but the Lord said divorce was not proper except in the case of fornication.—vss. 31,32

The Pharisees said it was proper to keep sworn vows, but Jesus told them not to swear at all—rather, to simply obey God. (vss. 33-37) They thought it was right to take “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,” but our Lord said not to retaliate at all.

(Matt. 5:38-42) In Matthew chapter 6, the Master said that their prayers were inadequate, and then told them how to pray. (vss. 5-15) He said their giving was wrong, and told them how to give properly. (vss. 1-4) In verses 19-34, Jesus told them they were concerned with material things when they should be seeking first the kingdom of God. In our theme text, he contrasts the limited love that the Pharisees had with the unselfish love that should characterize God's true children. In all of these examples, we see that the Pharisees and others of our Lord's day pulled down the high standards of God to a much lower, fallen human level.

God has called us to be a separated people, with convictions and standards that are not of this world. Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders of his day, because they were walking after the flesh, while claiming to be very religious and God-fearing. Their humanistic religious practices and traditions fell woefully short of God's standards.

We must listen carefully to Jesus' words on the subject of love recorded in the context of our opening Scripture: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:43-48, *New International*

Version) In these verses, Jesus tells us that the greatest way we can show love is to show it to our enemies. This is the supreme test of the Christian, and is one in which many will fall short of God's standard.

KEY TO OBEYING GOD'S COMMANDMENTS

In Matthew 22, we read of a lawyer who came to Jesus and asked him, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" (vs. 36) The Lord answered, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (vss. 37-40) Jesus here is saying that to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, is equivalent to keeping all of God's commandments. The Apostle Paul corroborates this, saying, "Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."—Rom. 13:8-10

The phrase in our opening scripture—"Ye have heard that it hath been said"—indicates that what follows was a Jewish tradition that had been passed down from generation to generation. Indeed, to

“hate your enemy” was not taught in the Law, as given in the Old Testament. It had been added as a tradition, and was taught by the Rabbis, but not by God’s Word. Accordingly, the Jewish leaders believed and taught that once a determination was made as to who constituted their neighbors, they were authorized to hate everyone else. Their low standard of love, therefore, was based solely upon their definition of a neighbor, rather than on God’s commandments. They had ignored teachings of the Old Testament such as found in these words: “If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink.”—Prov. 25:21

Another phrase that the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day had “heard that it hath been said” was, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour.” This was partially correct, being a quote from Leviticus 19:18. However, the entire quote from Leviticus says, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” The “as thyself” portion of God’s commandment had been left out by the Rabbinical teachers—a very convenient omission on their part. The Jewish leaders had developed such a spirit of pride that rather than be required to treat any others equal to themselves, they dropped the phrase, “as thyself.” They, in fact, did not desire to love anyone like they loved themselves. Their pride of self did not allow them to love anyone else equally.

HOW MUCH DO WE LOVE OTHERS?

As footstep followers of Christ, we must examine ourselves as to what is meant to love someone as we love ourselves. If we were to love someone, but

not as we love ourselves, we could do it at a distance. We would not have to treat them as well as we treat ourselves. We could perhaps easily demonstrate one-half, one-third, one-tenth, or some other small portion of the love that we would show ourselves. It could be very tempting to our fallen flesh to do as the Jewish leaders did—drop the little phrase “as thyself.” Jesus, however, wanted to drive his point directly to the heart of his disciples, including us, and so he told the lawyer, as previously cited, “Love thy neighbour as thyself.”—Matt. 22:39

There may be times when we feel that we do not truly love ourselves. Certainly, we do not love the mistakes that we make, or the fact that we seem to struggle to do God’s will at times in our lives. Yet, the fact remains that we do have a love for ourselves, evidence of which is manifest each and every day in our activities. We get out of bed each morning. We prepare ourselves for the day’s activities. We manage our personal finances. When we are sick, we call the doctor. In these and many other ways, we daily show love for ourselves in the sense that we are concerned about our needs. For the follower of Christ, this applies to both spiritual and temporal needs. In order to meet our needs, we must have an unfeigned love for ourselves. It is not an exhibition of pride to do this, as long as the needs we are striving to meet are wholesome and in accord with our consecration vows. Such properly motivated love for ourselves is genuine, habitual, and permanent. Thus, when we have an interest, we attempt to fulfill it. When we have a need, we strive to meet it. When we desire something that is proper, we endeavor to obtain it. The desire to meet our various needs should be

understood to always include this underlying heart sentiment: “Thy will be done.”

Based on these principles, we are to be concerned about our physical, spiritual, temporal, and eternal needs, all of which gives evidence that we love ourselves. Just as important as the way we love ourselves, however, is the way we are to love everyone else, including our enemies. Jesus showed that we are to have a genuine, habitual, and permanent love for others that considers their interests, needs, wants, hopes, ambitions, welfare, safety and comfort. To truly be our Lord’s disciples, and to fulfill his higher commandment, we must desire to help fulfill others’ needs and wants just as much as we desire to fulfill our own.

EXAMINING OURSELVES

All of us must gauge our progress in fulfilling the Lord’s commandment concerning love. We must ask ourselves such questions as: The last time we had a choice between doing what we wanted, or sacrificing our wishes for those of someone else, which path did we take? The temptation, in many cases, would be for us to pamper our own flesh, loving only ourselves. God’s standards are very high, and from the fallen human standpoint, to love our neighbor as ourselves is nearly impossible. This is because we tend to become so absorbed with our own needs that we fail to take the time to look at those of others. We must see to it, therefore, that we are developing the spirit of love which will cause us to lay down life itself for our neighbors, and even our enemies. Only in this way will we become “more than conquerors.”—Rom. 8:37

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us of various ways in which we, as his footstep followers, are to set ourselves apart from others. Although doctrinal views are certainly part of what sets us apart from the world in general, it is clear from Jesus' teachings that our character must have an equally important part in being separate from the world. The Adversary may tempt us to believe that our doctrinal views alone distinguish us from the world. Yet, as the Prophet Isaiah said concerning Israel, these do not make us "holier than thou." (Isa. 65:5) We must all take time to consider in what way our life is a testimony before the world and our brethren. The Apostle Paul said, "You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read of all men." (II Cor. 3:2, *New American Standard Bible*) At the present time, it is primarily our character which is "known and read" by those around us. We must endeavor, to the greatest extent possible, to develop an all-inclusive love, the crowning feature of the "mind of Christ." By so doing, we will let our light shine forth brighter and brighter, illuminating all our deeds and actions.

THE GOAL BEFORE US

We are to love others as much as we love ourselves. We must also learn to love our enemies. This is not an easy task. We have to battle the Adversary and our flesh—the "old man"—constantly. (Col. 3:9) Daily we must make a conscious effort to think about the interests, needs, welfare, safety and comfort of others. We must remember that the true test of our discipleship is our willingness to love those who do not love us.

A practical way of progressing toward the goal of loving even our enemies is to think of specific people with whom we are having problems, and find ways to show love toward them and to do them good. We should also pray diligently that we might grow in love and develop its fullness in our thoughts, words, and actions. Let us not be like the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders of Jesus' day who did not even live up to the love presented to them in the Law. Let us never be guilty, as they were, of lowering God's standards to our own fallen human level.

Our Lord gave an important lesson in Matthew 5:43-48 that we might benefit from and use to assist us in making our calling and election sure. To summarize his lesson, Jesus said that the purpose of this development is, "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven."—
vs. 45 ■