

THE ONE COMMANDMENT

by Ray C. Stedman

At times I grow tired of the ugliness of our world. Sickening reports of violence, rape, murder, drug traffic, pornography and child abuse are flung at us constantly by television and newspapers. It's enough to make you want to either fade out or blow the whole mess up. In our local paper last week there was a story that President Reagan, Constantin Chernenko of the Soviet Union and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain were each given one wish they could have fulfilled. Reagan wished that a flood would cover Russia; Chernenko wished for an earthquake to swallow the United States; but, asked what she wished, Margaret Thatcher replied, "Well, if those two wishes are granted I would like a nice relaxing scotch and soda!" Many would probably join her in that wish.

The world is well supplied these days with naive and simplistic solutions to some of the terrible problems that grip us. Every day we see bumper stickers that suggest easy ways to solve our problems. "Make Love Not War," "Arms Are For Embracing," "Ban the Bomb." Once I even saw one that said, "Abolish Hate." Well, these are perfectly proper goals, but I confess I grow weary of such mindless solutions.

Yet, when we turn to the wisdom of Jesus, as he is teaching his disciples in the Upper Room on the very night on which he was betrayed, it sounds as if he too is suggesting the same kind of futile advice when he tells them to "Love one another."

In the section for today, found in Chapter 13 of the Gospel of John, our Lord sends the traitor out from the midst of the disciples to do his dirty deed; then gives the disciples a new commandment that sums up all ten of the old ones in one commandment; and he reveals to Peter his coming denial of his Lord -- in that order.

I am not going to follow that order, however. But I want to begin with the new commandment, in Verses 31-35. We will understand what has happened to Judas and what is happening to Peter only when we see these in relationship to that central thing that Jesus talked about, the new commandment:

When he [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going you cannot come." A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. {John 13:31-35 RSV}

This is a very important moment in our Lord's life. He introduces it with these rather mysterious words about glorification: "The Son of Man is now glorified." He refers to the exodus of the traitor from the midst of the disciples. It is important to see that Jesus does not say this, nor does he give the new commandment, until Judas is gone. When Judas leaves Jesus says, "Now is the Son of Man glorified." That is, now (by this means) is God's purpose advanced and fulfilled. Not only the Son but the Father too is glorified. Further, Jesus says the Father will glorify himself again and he will do it immediately, which is clearly a reference to the cross. We know from the Scriptures that the whole universe exists for the glory of God, and, since Jesus himself tells us that here is a moment when God is glorified, we must see this as a very significant and profoundly important moment.

This is also indicated by the new name, "Little children," by which he addresses the disciples for the first time in his ministry. That is a tender word, a family word. Most commentators agree that it was at this moment in the events of the Upper Room that our Lord began to institute the Passover Supper (and what we call the Lord's supper), which immediately followed the Passover. Throughout the cities of Judea and Galilee and all through the length and breadth of the land that night, Jewish families were gathering to eat the Passover lamb.

It was traditional then, as it still is today, for the father to act as the host for the family and invite the children to ask questions that revealed the meaning of what was going on. The littlest child was the one who began by asking, "What do these things mean?" and the father explained.

Clearly this is what our Lord is doing here in the Upper Room. He sees himself as the head of a family of whom the disciples are the children. That is how he addresses them, "Little children," and they break in with the questions that children ask at times like this. Also our Lord here clearly states to the disciples that the time of his departure has now come. "Where I am going," he tells them, "you can not follow me." Within twelve hours he will be hanging upon a cross. Less than twenty hours from this he is cold and dead in the grave. This, then, is a time for last instructions.

Here they are: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." Those simple words, "Love one another," sound like a first-century bumper sticker. Imagine all the little donkeys of Israel with a sign on their rumps saying, "Love one another"! It looks very much like the same kind of rather futile advice that bumper stickers give to us today. While it's good advice, no one can carry it out. Yet the whole world has always agreed that this is exactly what we need to do to solve our problems. All this terrible array of evil that haunts us and sickens us today would disappear if we could teach people to "Love one another." All the ugliness, the child abuse, the broken marriages, the violent crime, the senseless destruction, the terrible drug traffic that is destroying our children, the awful pornography, the sex mills that grind continually in every big city -- all this would disappear if we learned to love one another.

I was interested to read in the volume *Caesar and Christ*, in Will Durant's great history *The Story of Civilization*. His description of the ministry of Jesus. Will Durant was not a Christian, but, as these words make clear, he understood the power of our Lord's ministry:

The revolution he sought was a far deeper one, without which reforms could only be superficial and transitory. If he could cleanse the human heart of selfish desire, cruelty, and lust, utopia would come of itself, and all those institutions that rise out of human greed and violence, and the consequent need for law, would disappear. Since this would be the profoundest of all revolutions, beside which all others would be mere coups d'etat of class ousting class and exploiting in its turn, Christ was, in this spiritual sense, the greatest revolutionary in history.

Will Durant recognized that if Jesus could teach people to love one another it would dramatically and drastically change the history of the world.

But is this merely futile advice, first-century bumper sticker wishful thinking? No, for in the wonderful way God has of hiding truth, hidden within this sentence of Jesus is a dramatic secret, the answer to the question we all ask, "How do you do this?" We all know how difficult it is to love unlovely people. Here is how one Christian writer described his problem in this area:

Loving people is about the most difficult thing that some of us do. We can be patient with people and even just and charitable, but how are we supposed to conjure up in our hearts that warm, effervescent sentiment of goodwill which the New Testament calls "love"? Some people are so miserably unlovable. That odorous person with the nasty cough who sat next to you in the train, shoving his newspaper into your face, those crude louts in the neighborhood with the barking dog, that smooth liar who took you in so completely last week -- by what magic are you supposed to feel toward these people anything but revulsion, distrust and resentment, and justified desire to have nothing to do with them?

We can all identify with that. How do we "Love one another"? Jesus tells us in these simple words, "As I have loved you." What the Greek, literally, says is, "As I have loved you in order that you might love one another." One is the cause and the other is the effect. As in many places in Scripture, the word "as" here can better be translated "since": "Since I have loved you in order that you might love one another." Here our Lord is saying that his love for us will stimulate and awaken within us the ability to love other people; his love will be the measure, the cause and the identifying mark of authentic love from him.

Our love, if we understand this and relate to it, will be like Jesus' love. I do not need to detail for you what that

is. It takes the whole of the gospels to tell of the marvelous, wonderful love of Jesus. I see at least three characteristics that were unusual (and inimitable) about his love:

- First, it was without respect of persons. He did not love people who were nice to love, as we do. He chose to love the unlovely: people who were rejected, difficult to love, looked down upon, held in contempt by society. He loved them, not because he wanted the good feeling of love, but simply because they needed love, and his love responded. This is the characteristic of his love. It goes out to people who need love regardless of what they are like, no matter how dirty, leprous, hurtful, proud or arrogant they may be. It goes out because they need love, without respect of persons.
- Secondly, that love will be expressed in deeds, not just words. It will not be mere talk about love, singing songs about love or calling oneself loving and not showing it. Love will be expressed in deeds. Remember the Lord's words at the scene of the last judgment when the sentence is pronounced to those on the right hand of the judge: "Enter into the kingdom that has been prepared, because when I was sick you visited me, when I was hungry you fed me, and when I was naked you clothed me..." {cf, Matt 25-34-35}. Deeds, not words.
- Thirdly, it is a love without end. This is how John describes that love where he introduces the whole chapter in these words, "Having loved his own, he loved them unto the end." He never gave up on them. He loved them as long as his love could do anything to reach them. And his love included even Judas. The love of Jesus reached out to all.

Henry Drummond, who was a contemporary of D. L. Moody (and an associate of his for a while), has written a tremendous message, a classic, on the "love chapter," First Corinthians 13, called *The Greatest Thing In The World*. In it he says that if a piece of ordinary steel is attached to a magnet and left there, after a while the magnetism of the magnet passes into the steel so that it too becomes a magnet. He points out that this is an example of what staying close to Jesus does. Earlier we sang,

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

This is what our Lord is teaching. It is those who learn to enjoy his love, who reckon on it, rejoice in it, feel the warmth of it and remind themselves of it; those who remember the fact that they do not deserve it, that they in no way have earned his love but they have it anyway; those are the ones who become magnetized with his love and are able to pass it on to others regardless of whether they respond in kind or not. That kind of dramatic, life-changing love is authentic Christian love. For two thousand years our Lord has been demonstrating that he can do this with people. Not everybody who calls himself a Christian displays this kind of love. (We will see why in a few moments.) Nevertheless there are hundreds of thousands, even millions, who through the course of the centuries have found this secret and do display a dramatic change of life. Rather than hard, arrogant, proud, contemptuous people they have become softened, loving people. Rather than violent, angry, injurious people who strike back at everyone who comes in their path they have become tender, loving, gentle people, changed by the love of Christ. That is what Jesus means by "as I have loved you."

Now we are ready to look at the other two figures in this drama. How do the actions of Judas and Peter relate to this new commandment? Here we will learn the answer to why some people who call themselves Christians -- even some who unmistakably are Christians -- do not always manifest this kind of love. Let us take the case of Judas first.

Remember both Judas and Peter were disciples. Both of them were close companions of Jesus, having been with him for three and a half years. They both teach us something very valuable.

The account of Judas begins in Verse 18 of Chapter 13, and proceeds in three movements which record dramatically how Jesus sought to reach and change this man. In Verse 18 Jesus begins to speak of Judas by quoting the passage of Scripture that predicted that a betrayal would occur.

I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen; it is that the scripture may be fulfilled, "He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." I tell you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives any one whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me. {John 13:18-20 RSV}

Jesus is quoting Verse 9 of Psalm 41, written by David 1,000 years before these events we are looking at took place. Here, in but one sentence out of that psalm, Jesus describes what is happening right at this very moment among the disciples. The psalm had said that one who ate bread with the Lord -- one of the ones whom he himself had chosen to be his disciple -- would not only fellowship and eat bread with him but would "lift up his heel against him." That is a dramatic picture. It is as though you met an old friend and, as you reached out your hand to greet him he responded by giving you a karate kick in the face. It is a picture of a reprehensible, dastardly, unexplained and unexplainable reaction to a proffer of love and friendship. That is what Jesus declared the psalm said would happen: The traitor would be a disciple, who would betray him in a reprehensible manner.

Judas did not have to be that traitor. There is evidence all through this account, even in the very verses we are looking at, that Judas could have turned. How God would have worked out the fulfilling of the prediction I do not know. I do not have to know. There was a time when John the Baptist said to the Pharisees, who claimed to be the children of Abraham, "God is able from these very stones to raise up children of Abraham," {cf, Matt 3:9, Luke 3:8}. God has a thousand and one ways to fulfill his purposes. We never need to say that Judas was forced into being a traitor. He chose to be the traitor by the day-to-day choices which he made.

But the psalm said that the act of treason would be a heartless, reprehensible thing, done in the face of the friendship that was offered him, like a heel lifted up to kick someone in the face. Our Lord says the event will be certain and it will be literal: "I have told you these things before they happen, that when it happens -- because they will happen -- you will know that I am the one of whom that psalm was speaking."

Then, in very important words introduced in Verse 20 by that *formula of focused attention*, "Truly, truly," Jesus declares that the reason why Judas refused to believe was because he had never received our Lord. He had never yielded to his Lordship, never opened up his will to Christ, but had always pursued his own course in the midst of the disciples, regardless of what the Lord wanted. He outwardly went along with many things. He, too, was sent out with the twelve to do outstanding miracles. The Scriptures report that, when they came back, all twelve of them recounted how they had seen devils cast out by their word, people were healed, the dead were raised. etc. Judas was one of the twelve. The Lord gave him power, even though he knew what his heart was like.

But, Jesus said, the reason why he failed was "because he did not receive me. He who receives me, receives him who sent me" In the first chapter of his gospel, John says, "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name," {John 1:12 KJV}. So it is possible to be a member of a church, a visible disciple, called a Christian, and regarded as a Christian by other Christians, and still not have your heart respond to Jesus and surrender to his will. This is the case with Judas.

Our Lord goes on to announce this betrayal to the disciples.

When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks." So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus answered, 'It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it.' So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. {John 13:21-26 RSV}

According to this account it was very difficult for Jesus to do this. He was "troubled in spirit." It bothered him greatly. Here is compassion of his heart going out to Judas. We can sense the hurt, the terrible pain and sense

of loss he felt, that one of his own should be involved like this. Jesus was deeply "troubled in spirit," emotionally stirred, hurt and upset by this.

It was difficult also for the disciples to believe that it was Judas. That is amazing? They were stunned and shaken by the revelation "One of you is to betray me." The other gospels tell us they began to look at one another and say to the Lord, "Lord, is it I?" That is one of the greatest signs of spiritual health among the rest of the disciples. They did not look at the Lord and point to one another, saying, "Is it him?" That is a marvelous commentary on the fact that we do not know ourselves very well. All of us at times have done things that shocked us, things we did not know we were capable of doing, or said things we did not realize we could have said. The disciples feel this. Filled with self-distrust they ask, "Lord, is it I?"

But this also indicates the smooth deceit of Judas, for he too said, "Lord, is it I?" He had so hidden his motives that none of the other disciples had the slightest idea that it was he. After three and a half years of living with these men he, had never said anything to the other disciples to tip them off that he did not agree with what the Lord was doing with them; that he had a different objective and a different purpose than they. He had hidden and covered it all.

As this account makes clear, when Jesus identified him, he did so only to John. John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," was lying on his side on his couch, his head close to the breast of Jesus. Simon Peter, who evidently was across the table, in his impetuous curiosity wants to know, "Who is this?" He signals to John to find out, and John asks Jesus, "Who is it?" Quietly, out of earshot of the others, Jesus replies, "It is the one to whom I will give this morsel." And he dipped the bread in the dish. It was a mark of friendship for the host to dip a piece of bread into the crushed fruit and wine that constituted one of the dishes of the Passover supper and then hand it to an honored person. Since Judas was on the other side of Jesus, our Lord simply dipped the bread in and passed it to him.

The other disciples were still unaware of what this meant, but when Judas took the morsel a sinister thing happened.

Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night. {John 13:27-30 RSV}

It is obviously a very profound word that John adds at the end, a word which refers more than simply the darkness of the night. It's really remarkable that here in the very presence of the Son of God himself, the Lord of Glory, the One to whom all power in heaven and on earth had been committed Satan, also present, entered into the heart and life of Judas.

There is a teaching around today that Christians ought to "bind" Satan before they do anything. Some groups mistakenly "bind" Satan by prayer before they begin a service. But our Lord does nothing of the sort. He knows Satan is personally present, and yet he does nothing to stop him, because he understands what we must come to understand -- that it is the will of the individual alone that determines the outcome.

Let me share with you the comment on this scene by the great Bible scholar, Dr. F. F. Bruce:

Satan could not have entered into him had he not granted him admission. Had he been willing to say "No" to the adversary, all of his Master's intercessory power was available to him there and then to strengthen him. But when a disciple's will turns traitor, when the spiritual aid of Christ is refused, that person's condition is desperate indeed.

That is the problem. Judas consistently refused the help that Jesus offered. He consistently refused to open his life, surrender his will and let Jesus in. As a consequence, Jesus' power to give the gift of love that would change his heart could never reach Judas. After this, as John tells us, Jesus made no further effort to change him. "Get your business done quickly!" he told him. Judas went out into the Judaeen night, and as John

infers, into the darkness of Satanic gloom.

Have you ever known anyone named Judas? Isn't it remarkable that children are still named Adolph, or Benedict, but no one who has known the biblical story has, to my knowledge, ever named a child Judas? (I'm sure somebody is going to tell me that he grew up with a boy named Judas, but I have never met anyone with that name.) It has become the symbol of everything dishonorable and treacherous in human relationships. The gift of love that Jesus came to give can never help those who persistently refuse his life. That is one reason why many people who call themselves Christians, who regard themselves as such, and are regarded as such by other people, do not, and cannot, manifest the love that Jesus is speaking about.

Now, what about Peter? We get his story at the end of the chapter. Apparently Peter never heard what the Lord said about the new commandment. All he heard was, "Yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you. 'Where I am going you cannot come.'" Like a child in school, Peter immediately shoots up his hand and says, "Lord, where are you going?" I am always amazed at the patience of Jesus. If I had been there I would have said, "Peter, when are you going to get the message? I have told you a dozen times where I am going. I am going to a cross. I am going to a tomb. I am going home to the Father." But Peter never heard.

Jesus does not rebuke him because he knows that what he meant to ask was not "Where are you going?" but, "Why can't I go with you?" Have your children ever asked you that? "Why can't I go, Daddy?" Jesus answers, "You can not follow me now! But afterward, you shall." It was a long time afterward. Probably 30 or more years went by before Peter, then an old man, imprisoned in Rome, was led out and, according to the traditional account, was condemned to be crucified. So moved was he by the fact that he was to share the manner of his Lord's death, he insisted on being crucified upside down. Thus our Lord's words were literally fulfilled. "You can not go with me now, Peter, but afterward you shall."

But there is another reason why Peter cannot follow the Lord now: His love is the wrong kind of love.

... Peter said to him, "Lord, why cannot I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the cock will not crow, till you have denied me three times. {John 13:36-38 RSV}

Peter was perfectly sincere when he said these words. He was thoroughly committed to Christ and his cause. He felt right down to his toes that he would lay down his life for his Lord. His loyalty mounts to the fore here, and he declares he is quite willing to die for him. Jesus knows he means it, but he also knows that it is a totally unreliable commitment. He knows that it comes from purely natural affection, and natural affection is never strong enough to handle the demands against love in this life.

That is what we too must learn.

Peter's affection was the kind that he would have had for anybody close to him. Before he was born again he loved his wife, his mother and his father, his brothers and his sisters (if he had any) with a purely natural love. Under certain circumstances he would also have laid down his life for them. Natural affection can do this. Many a person has laid down his life out of a natural love. But it was not yet love born of the Spirit within, and capable of effecting a bold witness instead of a dramatic self-immolation.

Here is the primary reason why Christians do not often manifest the unique quality of love that Jesus is talking about when he commands, "Love one another." We feel that our natural affection is fulfilling that demand; that if we love those who are dear to us, and near to us, we are loving one another. But we are not. Natural affection, natural zeal can not do God's work.

New Christians, their faces aglow and their hearts aflame with love for the Lord, oftentimes dream up grandiose plans to win the world for Christ. Some of them have great gifts of organization and they set up programs designed to win the world for Christ in this generation. They mean it. Fired with zeal they go out to buttonhole people on the streets, riding roughshod over personal rights, offending their own families (and slowing down their conversion for several years). That is what natural zeal does. People filled with that kind

of zeal are always exciting to be around. It looks like they are going to get something done, but it always falls apart because, like Peter, they don't understand the weakness of the flesh.

It's a great period of hope, because, as he did with Peter, our Lord is quite willing to teach them; it will be a process of pain and hurt, rejection and failure. I don't know any Christian who has ever been used of God who hasn't had to go through that same process.

We must learn that our zeal for Christ will not do what he wants done. We have to learn through failure, hurt, and rejection, to glory in his love for us -- not our love for him -- then our own hearts will begin to burn with his same love.

Peter is an example of this. After the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of grace had fallen upon him, and began to impart to him an inner awareness of the love of Jesus for him, he was able to tell what had happened to the many people who had shouted for Christ's death on the cross. With boldness and plainness, he preached so powerfully in the strength of the Spirit that three thousand people were converted on that day.

This is the lesson that will be taught us precisely and plainly by our Lord here in the Upper Room.

Here is the first hint that the secret of changing the world is teaching people how to love one another -- and that when we manifest that kind of love, either as individuals or as a group, we become a loving community.

The world may not always agree with us, they may not always come and join us -- although many of them will -- but they will know one thing: Such people have been with Jesus. "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for another."

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