

LOVING AMIDST HATE

by Ray C. Stedman

Which is harder, loving people whom you do not like, or loving people who do not like you? Most of us would be hard pressed to answer that, yet we are often called on to do these very things. How practical, how down to earth is the Word of God! It deals with issues right where we live. This very week you may be called on to love somebody you do not like, or love someone who does not like you.

In John 15 we are learning how to do this. Jesus has already revealed the fundamental secret of Christian living, out of which everything else flows. These seven words of Jesus, "You in me and I in you," are, in my estimation, the most profound truth ever revealed on this planet. Discovering their meaning is the business of the Christian life. Like Einstein's formula, $E = mc^2$, this simple statement is a description of unbelievable power.

Here John describes the three things that will happen when this principle begins to work itself out in life. The first result is described in the opening verses of Chapter 15, under the symbol of the vine and its branches, and the fruit the vine produces. When we begin to put into practice the concept "You in me and I in you," the first person who is changed is ourselves. We grow more Christlike. We display the "fruit of the Spirit." We become more gentle, more gracious, more loving, more easy to live with, more able to cope, more panic-proof. We begin to handle life the way we were intended to do. That is what it means to become Christlike.

We look now at a brief paragraph in which our Lord describes the change that will happen in our relationships with each other within the community of faith. Then, in the last section of Chapter 16, Jesus states the attitudes we must show toward a hostile world around us.

Here, in the words of Jesus, is the secret of loving others whom you do not like.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another." {John 15:12-17 RSV}

If we are Christians at all, if his life is in us and we are in him, then we do not have any option in this matter. Both at the beginning and at the end of this paragraph we are commanded to "love one another." Many are troubled by that. "How can you command love?" they ask. "Love is a feeling. Some people you love, some you don't. If you don't like them you can't make yourself love them. You can tolerate them, but you can't love them." But people who say such things do not understand what the Bible means when it uses the word "love." The idea, widespread in the world, which regards love as a feeling that automatically comes when one has a certain affinity toward another, limits love only to those we naturally like.

But the command of our Lord is quite different. It is put as a command because real love, God's love, is a decision to act for the benefit of someone else no matter how you feel about him or her. Until we understand that, there is no way we can even begin to obey our Lord's command. Love is a decision to be kind, gracious, considerate, helpful, firm, or whatever will minister to another's benefit no matter how you feel. That is the love Jesus commands.

Yet it is not merely a duty to be performed. Taken that way it sounds difficult and without delight. But Jesus

adds a phrase here which becomes a powerful motive to enable us to obey this command. This is very important. It is not merely a law -- "Love one another" -- that is laid upon us, but there is also a motive provided, found in these words, "as I have loved you."

Have you ever considered how difficult it was, at times, for Jesus to love these disciples? It's because they were just like us! They could be stubborn, quarrelsome, selfish, ambitious, often presumptuous men. They insulted him, ignored, and disobeyed him at times. He did not always automatically feel love for them. How else can we explain those times when he said to them, "How long must I be with you?" {Matt 17:17, Mark 9:19, Luke 9:41}. It was clearly a strain to be around them. As Hebrews 12 says, "he endured the contradiction of sinners against himself," {cf, Heb 12:3 KJV}.

How then did he love them? We find the answer in Verse 9 of the previous section. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you;" {John 15:9 RSV}. There is the key to love. It is not trying to love someone by determining to feel loving and making yourself act that way. Love comes naturally and flows fully out of a heart that is itself conscious of being loved. When Jesus had difficulty loving these men he didn't simply grit his teeth and try to be nice. He began to reflect on how the Father loved him, how wonderful it was to be approved and loved of God. He strengthened and steadied himself with the fact that the Father cherished him. That is why he went out on the hillsides at times to pray and renew himself in the Father's love. Then he could come back and endure with patience the follies, futilities, and fragilities of these men.

That is how we are to love also. When you struggle with loving somebody, when someone irritates you, and you do not feel like loving him or her, review Christ's love for you. Think not only of the cross, but of his present dealings with you, how he cares for you, supports you and acknowledges you as one of his own, how he tenderly provides for you and disciplines you. You will find a wonderful thing happening. Paul describes it in Romans 8, "The love of God which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit" begins to flow out to others around you. I have learned that not everybody is as loving, patient, gracious and kind as I am! Have you found that too? People are hard to love at times. I have had to learn not to try to love them, to grit my teeth and try to be patient (although I do have to make a decision to do so) but to reflect again upon this sacred secret, that God loves me. Out of that realization flows love for others.

Not only does Jesus command us to love and tell us how to do it, but he goes on to say what that love will look like when it is present. How does love, God's kind of love, manifest itself when it is worked out in life? Certainly it is not in mere words. It is not joining hands on a Sunday morning and singing, "They will know we are Christians by our love." There is nothing wrong with that, but it is not, in itself, a manifestation of the love of God. The kind of love Jesus is talking about is manifested in deeds.

He states three ways in which true love will appear:

First, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Those words are inscribed on the headstone on the grave of Dawson Trotman, the founder of the Navigators, high on the hillside overlooking Glen Eyrie, in Colorado Springs. Trotman was drowned in a boating accident in a lake in northern New York. He and some young people had been taking a joyride, but the boat had swung too sharply and they had all been thrown into the water. One of the girls could not swim and Dawson knew it. He could have saved himself, but instead he swam to this girl, brought her back to the boat, helped the others lift her up into the boat, but by the time her panic had subsided, and they turned around to help him he was gone. Thus they wrote on his grave, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

You cannot go further than that; that is the point Jesus is making. There is no need to contrast this with the fact that Jesus died for his enemies. He is talking here about what you can do for your friends, and no one can do more than to die. But he surely means more than getting yourself killed on their behalf. If that is what he meant, you can only do that once and then it is over. No, this describes a process. There are levels of "laying down your life." It means to give of yourself, to take part of your life and to give it on behalf of someone else.

On Thursday nights our whole church facility is taken over by many Vietnamese families, young people and old alike, who are learning to read and speak English and studying the Bible. That ministry came into being because a couple from our congregation "laid down their life" for these people. They began to take the time to

help them, to study with them, to provide things they needed. That work has reached a whole community. The same thing has happened with Polish families. Some have "laid down their life" on behalf of these families, and the result is they are being reached and helped in a wonderful way.

At the Easter Sunrise Service, Sid McDonald, a new Christian, shared his experience. Among other things he said these words which impressed me: "Jesus said, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' but I found I could not do that alone. When I was the center of my life it was hard to put others first. But when I asked Christ to be the center of my life, with the power of the Holy Spirit living through me, Christ can do it for me. Life is so much more fulfilling in being able to do for others. It gives me a sense of joy and inner peace that I have never had before." That is what Jesus is describing. It is not always to look out for yourself but being willing to lay down part of your life (your money, your time), for someone else. That is the first way love appears. It is a matter of self-denying service.

Secondly, Jesus says, "You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." In those words our Lord is lifting these men from the level of mere slaves, who must obey because it is to their best interests to do so, to another, more intimate, level -- friends -- who want to obey because they have been allowed into the inner secrets of another person's life.

How do you tell the difference between your acquaintances and your friends? Friends are the ones you call on the phone and tell them what you are going through, or share a joy with them. You let them into your life. Jesus says: "I cannot call you servants any longer. I have told you too much. I have told you all the secrets my Father has told me." In Matthew he said, "I have come to utter secrets that have been hid since the foundation of the world," {cf, Matt 13:35}. Men who have heard such secrets can no longer be regarded as mere servants; they are friends. More than that, Jesus had shared his struggles, his pains, with these disciples. Very shortly he will say to Peter, James, and John, "Come apart with me. My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death. Come and pray with me," {cf, Matt 26:30, Mark 14:34}. He will ask them to share his struggle, share his hurt. That is love. Love is an open sharing of who you are and what you feel, taking down the facades, and being real with people.

This is the power of small group ministries. I urge all Christians to get into a small group. Agree together to do some service, some ministry in the Lord's name, but also take time to share with one another who you are. Let them in on what you are really like. That is loving them as Jesus describes. It can be likened to what I heard once about sand hill cranes, those great birds that fly in "V" formations across the sky. I was told three remarkable things about these birds. First, there is always a leader. He sets the direction for the others following, which way they are to go. But the second thing is, it is never the same leader! They share leadership, taking turns being out in front, setting the direction and the goal of the group. The third thing is, the others following keep honking all the time, encouraging the leader, "Keep it up! Good going! That's the way to go!" That is a small group ministering together. That is what our Lord is describing here. Mutual sharing is a form of love.

Then the third mark of love follows: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you [the word is, "strategically placed" you] that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain so that ["so that" -- do not miss that connection; you are to bear fruit "so that"] whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you." Jesus is saying to these men, "Wherever you are, remember that I put you there." That is what he is saying to us, too. "I strategically placed you right in the midst of those difficult people you have to work with, so that amidst the difficulty, the pressure and the pain you might become a gracious, loving, patient, thoughtful, powerful Christian. Bear fruit, and in the process you can ask the Father for the needs of these people and God will begin to move in their lives as well." Life-related praying. That is what Jesus says it means to "love one another." Self-denying service, mutual sharing, and life-related praying. That is love.

So much for loving those we do not like. Now, what about our attitude toward those who do not like us? The Lord continues:

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose

you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also." {John 15:18-20 RSV}

Perhaps the strangest puzzle to a new Christian is the sudden and always surprising hostility he meets when he first tells his family or his friends about the new life he has found in Christ. In the past when he shared with them about joys he had found they all became excited with him and reacted positively, but when he tells them about Christ he runs into a strange resistance. No one seems interested. They look at him strangely. They draw back and do not encourage him. This has confused and bewildered many a new Christian.

Here our Lord helps us understand the hostility of the world. He says two basic things that we must note:

First, there is nothing personal about this type of reaction. He says, "It happened to me, too." Jesus experienced it, and he was perfect. We can, of course, offend people by our aggressiveness at times, yet much of the hostility we run into when we talk about our faith as Christians is not directed at us at all, even though it feels to us as if it is. It is very helpful to remember that Jesus had the same experience.

Secondly, Jesus says it will come because you are now a different person than you were. "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." You are different, and the world does not like anything different. The one unrelenting pressure of society around us is to conform, to shape up. When the man who invented the umbrella first tried it out on the streets of London in the last century, he was pelted with stones and rotten vegetables just because he was different. You don't have to be religious to be persecuted. Have you ever been persecuted in traffic? Well, how do you react?

Jesus says it can happen anywhere. If you are different it will happen. Peter speaks of this. In the fourth chapter of his first letter he says something very helpful: "Let the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you," {1 Pet 4:3-4 RSV}. That abuse is because you are different.

I heard once of a young man who had just become a Christian and his worldly friends were accusing him, "You know, you're no fun any more. You don't do any of the things we used to do together. You don't get drunk, you don't sleep around, you don't gamble, you don't steal gas or anything any more." He very wisely replied, "You have it wrong. I do all those things that I want to do. I steal all the gas I want. I get drunk as many times as I want. I sleep around with girls any time I want. The thing is, I don't want to any more. It is my wants that have changed." He went on to explain that he had occasional temptations along these lines. It was not always easy to say no, but there was a difference, there was a change. He now wanted to be different and when he failed he hated it. That is what this describes. Jesus says you will be different and therefore your friends will treat you coolly and even harshly.

Thirdly, Jesus declares, persecution cannot be avoided: "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.'" I know some who can hardly bear the idea of being rejected by anybody for anything. They tend to conform, to compromise in any way they can. Jesus says, "Now watch out. Remember, you are not better than I. God is not going to deliver you from this kind of pressure any more than he delivered me. If I, your Master, had to go through this type of temptation so will you." It cannot be avoided, so face up to it. It is part of following Jesus.

I had lunch last week with Brother Andrew, the man who has been called "God's Smuggler." He has faced the hostility of anti-Christian governments all over the world as he has carried in Bibles to the believers in these countries. Now he is involved not so much in Bible distribution as in ministering to the persecuted saints behind the Iron Curtains of the world. He told me how he encourages them by quoting often a verse from Psalm 18, "By my God I can run through a troop; by Him I can leap over a wall," {cf, Psa 18:29}. He asks them, "What do you think it takes to run through a troop and to leap over a wall?" The answer he gets is usually something about faith. Then he says, "No, what it takes is a troop and a wall. How are you going to run through a troop if there is no troop? How are you going to leap over a wall if there is no wall?" There must

be opposition, persecution, pressure and resistance or you cannot demonstrate that you are equipped by God to handle that kind of situation. Thus Jesus says here, it cannot be avoided.

Ah, but there is good news, too. The last point is, it will not be universal. "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also." There will also be much success. There will be some who will listen, who will be changed and delivered. Therefore, take heart. They will keep your word as well.

The second thing he says about the world's hatred is, it is very deep-rooted. You are not going to eliminate persecution, much as you would like to do so.

"But all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It is to fulfill the word that is written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause.'" {John 15:21-25 RSV}

Jesus identifies the basic cause of this deep-rooted problem as godlessness. It is because "they do not know him who sent me." It is startling to realize that the people he was talking about were the religious leaders of the day. These were men of God, supposedly, who prided themselves on their knowledge of God. But Jesus said they did not know the real God. They had the wrong god, a false god. They thought they were worshipping the real God but they were not. There is probably no better example of this than that young hot-headed Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus. When he became the Apostle Paul he gave his testimony and said, "In those days I thought there were many things that I ought to do against Jesus of Nazareth. But I received mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief," {cf, 1 Tim 1:12-13}. Ignorance is the basic problem of the world. Much of the temptation and persecution we face is because people are ignorant of the real God, though they think they know him.

But, Jesus says, these men are personally inexcusable because they had heard his words and saw his works. When someone is exposed to the truth and still rejects it his condemnation is double. They rejected his words and thus manifested their hatred of his Father. They ignored his works, the predicted works of the Messiah, and so compounded their hate. But, Jesus says it was all a fulfillment of prophecy. God knew it would happen. They fulfilled the word that said, "They hated me without a cause," {cf, Psa 35:19, 69:4}.

How should we respond to the hatred of the world? In the last section Jesus tells us what to do about this.

"But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.

"I have said all this to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you of them." {John 15:26 - 16:4}

There are four remarkable things here:

First, by what means should we respond? "The Spirit is coming," Jesus promises. For us, of course, he has already come. For these men when he comes, Jesus says, "he will bear witness to you" -- not to the world. Somehow these words have gotten all twisted. We have read them as though the Spirit is coming to bear witness to the world. He is not. His is a witness "to you," within you. It is a witness that Jesus is truly alive, truly your Lord, powerful and truly sovereign. That is what will encourage you to witness. I want to confess to you that I am tired of classes on witnessing, to teach people the mechanics of witness. You never find such anywhere in the Scriptures. Those who have experienced the reality of Jesus, by means of the Spirit, do not have any problem witnessing. They only talk about what has happened to them.

Jesus makes that his next point. He says, "You also are witnesses because you have been with me from the beginning." Clearly he is referring to the apostles here, but it also applies to us. How do you witness? You tell someone about what has happened to you, that is all. You review what God has done for you, what he means to you, what he has been to you from the beginning of your Christian life. That is the only truly effective witness.

The third point he makes is: Keep it up despite the fierceness of the persecution. "They will cast you out of the synagogues. They will kill you and think they are offering service to God." The world's persecution can be very rabid, virulent and violent, but the Lord says, "don't run away." He will stand by you to steady you. In those circumstances keep talking about what Jesus is to you, despite the fierceness of the persecution. Paul could say about his appearance before Nero, "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully," {cf, 2 Tim 4:17a RSV}.

The final point he makes is: "I have told you all this beforehand." You are forewarned. Do not be surprised when it comes. Again, Peter picks that up: "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which is trying you," {cf, 1 Pet 4:12}. It is part of the process, it is what Jesus said would happen. Let us get rid once and for all of this dream of settling down in this world, to be liked by everybody and having no problems and no hardships. "They that live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution," {cf, 2 Tim 3:12}. There is a war going on, but victory is certain. The question is, "Are we on the right side?" Let us not retaliate against resistance, but respond with truth and courage in our hearts.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for the teaching of Jesus, faithful, honest, forthright, telling us exactly what will happen. Help us not to be surprised but to be patient and loving in return. We ask in His name. Amen.

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