

The Greatest Commandment of All

by Walton Weaver

Without love nothing really amounts to anything. Paul says as much when he says, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass of a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

But with love the smallest things become great. Many a mother's heart has been touched by the small child bringing wild flowers in to her. A kind word, a sympathetic look, or a short visit by some thoughtful person has helped mend many broken hearts. Nothing great was required; only a small thing done in love.

Jesus summarized the paramount importance of love for God when He laid down the greatest commandment of all: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment" (Matt. 22:37-38). The second commandment, He said, was like the first: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). His summary of the all-important nature of these two commandments was, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40).

LAW OF LOVE CENTRAL

Paul also makes a summary statement on love and the law when he quotes four of the ten commandments and says, "if there is any other commandment," they "are summed up in this saying, namely, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'" He then adds, "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:9, 10). There can be no question then that the law of love is central in relation to God, in relation to our neighbor, and in relation to ourselves. But in what way is it central? In commenting on Jesus' statement that the whole law and the prophets hang on the two commandments to love God and neighbor, J. W. McGarvey explains that "there is a tacit comparison of these two commandments to a nook in the wall on which are hung all the books of law and the prophets. As the nook supports all, so to keep these two commandments is to do all that is required by the Scriptures. He who loves God as required will keep all of God's commandments, and he who loves his neighbor will fulfill every obligation to his neighbor."

So the law of love does not mean that as long as one loves God and his neighbor he may disregard all the other commandments. When one truly loves God and his neighbor he will naturally do all that is required of him toward God and his neighbor. There are many other commandments and these one will be careful to keep because he does love God and his neighbor.

LOVE OF GOD

Jesus laid down this same principle when He told His disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn. 15:14). What is true of Jesus is also true of the Father, because He came to make known the Father's will (1 Jn. 5:3). In fact, keeping His commandments is a sign that we also love the children of God (1 Jn. 5:2) and our love for one another is our badge of discipleship-that we are truly Jesus' disciples (Jn. 13:34-35) .

How may we know what it means to love God with all our mind, heart, soul and strength? One way to know for sure is to look to Jesus and seek to emulate His love for God. He stands before us as the perfect pattern of love. When He tells us to love one another as His disciples His standard is, "even as I have loved you" (Jn. 13:34). Our love for God should be the same, even as God has loved us, and as Jesus demonstrated His love for the Father. Jesus' love for the Father was a working, persistent, forgiving, and sacrificial love.

LOVE OF NEIGHBOR

Love for neighbor in the fullest and highest sense is dependent upon proper love for God. This is illustrated in the two main divisions of the ten commandments. The first four of the ten have to do with one's duty to God. The last six deal with duties to our fellow man. The first and great commandment to love God is a summation of one's whole duty to God, beginning with those laws in the ten commandments that express our duty to God, and then branching out into all the other various laws and statutes that have to do with our duty toward God that are found in other parts of the law and the prophets. The same procedure is followed with regard to love of neighbor. The law of love for neighbor also comprehends all that the law and the prophets have to say about duties toward our neighbor. But duties toward neighbor are rooted and grounded in the duties we have toward God. If one truly loves God and is doing what he ought in his relation to God, his love for neighbor will be a natural outgrowth of that basic and fundamental love he has for God.

But what does it mean for one to love his neighbor? Is the love required in the second commandment to be thought of as a sentiment? The clear answer to this question is a decided, no. Paul's discussion of this second commandment excludes mere sentiment, or how one feels about his neighbor, as the possible meaning of love in the commandment. Sentiment is excluded as a possible meaning of love by Paul's statement, "love worketh no ill to his neighbor" (Rom. 13:10). The second commandment is concerned with how we treat our neighbor, not merely how we feel about him. I may not have the best feelings about one who threatens my life, or slanders me, or takes my possessions. But if I love that person who would do me wrong, I will not desire that harm come upon him, nor will I do any harm to him. Negatively speaking, the second commandment guards us against doing any harm against our neighbor, and positively it leads us to promote our neighbor's good. So Paul in telling us that love "worketh no ill to his neighbor" (Rom. 13:10), is in

fact defining the meaning of love for us. We show love not so much by how we feel as by what we wish for others and by what we do to or for them. Agape (the word used in the two commandments) love is active goodwill. Other words for love convey more the idea of feelings, but agape love speaks of what we wish for another person and how we act with regard to him. This is the only kind of love we are commanded to practice.

LOVE NEIGHBOR AS SELF

The measure of our love for neighbor is "as yourself." According to the meaning of the word used here for love (*agape*) we love ourselves by wishing ourselves well and doing good for ourselves. How then are we to love our neighbor? We are to sincerely wish him well. This means that we are to have his best interests at heart, just as we have our own best interests at heart. But what if our neighbor does us wrong, are we still to love him? Of course, we are. Jesus teaches that we are to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44). But notice again that the kind of love He requires is active goodwill---bless them, do good to them, and pray for them. You may hate their sin, but you must desire and seek only good for them. We hate our own sin when we do wrong, but we go on loving ourselves. So Paul says, do the same for your neighbor. Hate his sin, but go on loving him (wish him well and do good to him).

In view of the perverted concept of self-esteem, or self-love, being advocated today, it is important to remember that we are never commanded to love ourselves. Jesus said there are two commandments on love. He did not say there are three. The second commandment does correctly assume the truth that man does love himself and it uses this fact to serve as the standard for love for our neighbor. Man does love himself. He already does. So Jesus says we are to love our neighbor as ourself. How is that? How does man love himself? He wishes himself well and does only that which is good toward himself.

Man does not always feel good about himself, but he does always wish good for himself. The truth is, I should not always feel good about myself, because I do not always live up to what I ought to be. I don't always like what I see when I take an honest look at myself. But I don't stop loving myself. I go on sincerely wishing myself well. This is the kind of love I practice toward myself, and this is the kind of love I am commanded to practice toward my neighbor.