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When I was at Oxford, I had a conversation with a man who struggled with his spiritual life. He had searched for God for a number of years, wondering if indeed there was a God. We had a long conversation one evening in the Junior Commons Room of Regent's Park College, and in the course of that conversation the man kept talking about Jesus and the whole concept of love that Christianity is supposed to embody. He was upset by the idea that Jesus commanded His disciples to love.

Jesus did give His disciples the command to love (John 13:34), but even more so, to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44). He told us to love those who hate us and to pray for those who persecute us. This command upset my friend, because he said he could not just turn love on and off like a switch. He felt people could not control their emotions to that extent. He said that people could not will to feel a certain way about someone else.

He carried the conversation further and began to wonder if love is nothing more than a code of morality. He could deal with love as a moral code if that is what Christianity means by love, but he wanted to know if that is what Jesus meant.

The Command to Love

Jesus did command His disciples to love. In fact, the night He was taken, the night they gathered in the upper room, He said, "This I command you, to love one another" (John 15:17). "I command you, to love." For Jesus, love is something that can be commanded, and we are expected to obey. As we look at what Jesus and the New Testament say about love, we discover that love is not simply an emotion. We rarely have the opportunity to show "Christian" love to people close to us. People with whom we are deeply involved, like our par-

ents, siblings, children, and close friends, rarely become the recipients of our Christian love. Those deep, intimate relationships have too much giving and receiving in return.

More Than Reciprocity

Jesus said that this kind of love marked by giving and receiving is not unusual. It is not restricted to Christians, and people all over the world, both good and bad, experience this kind of love. This kind of love marks the giving and receiving in a marriage or in a friendship. Jesus said that even the heathen have warm feelings for those that are close to them (Luke 6:32-33). This principle of reciprocity which we see in intimate relationships is not the sort of love that can be commanded. In a sense, it is an investment. We give knowing that we are going to receive something in return.

This experience of love is not necessarily bad. Knowing that someone else loves us and shares in this constant giving and receiving is one of the beautiful experiences that makes life worthwhile. But true love of the type Jesus talked about, this perfect love that He commands us to have, emerges in deep personal relationships only when all the benefits are gone. It can emerge when the warm feelings suddenly or gradually subside. It can emerge when the old romantic stirrings of marriage have faded. It can emerge when we find that our parents are too old and feeble to do anything for us anymore, and life becomes a matter of constantly doing for them. It can emerge when old relationships become a constant demand and drain on us. It can emerge when friends betray us, let us down, or neglect us. In these sorts of crisis moments, suddenly we have the opportunity for love as Jesus speaks of it. It is not the emotion that we feel at such times but the sheer exercise of the will that "I will love."

More Than Passionate Desire

Holy love is not characterized by what Paul mentions in Galatians as passion or desire for something. Even in marriage, love seeks or desires something. In marriage there is a seeking of the other person. Marriage contains a certain selfishness that might be expressed, "I want that person to be with me, and me alone." The sort of love that brings people together in marriage contains an element of self-seeking, but Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 13 that "love does not insist on its

own way." It is not self-interested or out for its own gratification.

In Charles Dickens's novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, the climax came when a family was in deep trouble. The husband was about to be executed during the Reign of Terror in Paris, and the man who loved the hero's wife had the strange gift of being virtually identical in appearance to the condemned man. Had the hero died, perhaps this character would have had the opportunity to court the dead man's wife. Instead, he substituted himself for the hero, through trickery, thus becoming the hero himself. He went to the guillotine and died in place of the other with the words, "Tis a far better thing I do than I have ever done before." In this bit of fiction one sees the sort of love that is not self-interested but is self-giving, knowing that nothing will ever come back in return.

More Than Emotion

Holy love is not an emotion that can be snuffed out. The apostle Paul said that love never ends (1 Cor. 13:8). Marriage relationships can end, friendships can end, and brothers and sisters can despise one another, but true love as Christ spoke of it never ends. When the crisis comes that kills emotions and destroys feelings, love bears all things (1 Cor. 13:7). Love believes all things, love hopes all things, and love endures all things. It is not an emotion that comes and goes, rather it is an attitude and an action that can be willed and commanded: "I will stick it out! I will help those persons no matter how stubborn and obnoxious they are!"

It is interesting to note that when Jesus was asked to explain what loving one's neighbor meant, He gave the example of a Samaritan. He told of a Samaritan helping a stranger, someone with whom that Samaritan's only emotional and personal involvement was mutual racial bigotry. The Samaritan responded from the deep-seated attitude that if someone needed his help, he was going to help the person. Love is more than a feeling. It is an attitude for living that can be willed.

The Act of Love

Another thing Jesus said about this kind of love is that it is given without hope of reward. Often the love that we give in such a case is in spite of the behavior of the person we are loving. God and how He acts is what love really is. So often we take love as we experience it on

earth, see that love is mentioned in the Bible, and conclude that our experiences equal spiritual love. But Jesus took a different approach to defining love. Look first at what God does and how He does it, then you begin to get an idea of what love means. Jesus said that God sends the rain on the just and the unjust alike (Matt. 5:45). God loves both categories of people. He lets the sun come up on the fields of the wicked just as He lets the sun come up on the fields of the righteous. Love is doing things for people who do not appreciate it.

Love as Charity

Despite all the advances in modern translations of the Bible, the *King James Version* of 1611 probably translates the idea of love in 1 Corinthians 13 better than any other. When I first went to seminary, I learned that the Greek word the *King James Version* translates *charity* is translated in most other places in the New Testament as *love*. The modern translators have tended to discard the word *charity* and replace it with *love*. By losing the idea of charity in love, we have also lost the sense behind the command of Jesus to love. Regaining the understanding of charity in our idea of love is essential to our being able to *do* love. The word *love* has the idea of emotion and feeling about it, but *charity* is something people do.

The Latin word found in the Vulgate, from which the translators in 1611 derived the word *charity*, has the concept of costliness in its root meaning. This kind of love—charity—is costly. It is expensive to express. It costs a person something to show it. Even the tax collectors loved people who loved them back. Jesus asked His audience point blank if they saluted just their brothers, just their friends, just those that were close to them, or just those who could return the favor. If they loved only these people, what were they doing differently from everyone else? Didn't even the Gentiles do the same (Matt. 5:46-47)? Love, on the other hand, costs us something because we do not get anything back when we love.

Love also governs our attitudes toward people. Abraham Lincoln used *charity* this way in his second inaugural address: "With malice toward none; with charity for all." Lincoln was speaking of his enemies, the ones the Union Army was fighting and killing on the battlefields—those vociferous Southerners. Charity—love—should mark our attitude toward our enemies, Jesus said, especially those who hate

us or persecute us. Love characterizes the Christian's attitude because God is our example of what love is.

Love as Attitude

Jesus said, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Because Christians are the children of God, their lives must be like His life. Since the Spirit of God dwells in all Christians, their lives must be like His life. Yet God loves those who sin against Him. He sends the sun and the rain for those who sin against Him, but most remarkably, "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8, KJV). Love characterizes God and the way God deals with the world, His enemies, and all people. The Bible says that while we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son. Love is the attitude of God. It is costly, for it cost Him His Son, but it is a free gift motivated by caring concern.

In the Old Testament, the loving that characterizes God is called "steadfast love." In Hebrew it is the same word that is translated "mercy." *Mercy* is God's attitude toward those who need mercy. I had a friend in college who managed to "squeeze" four years of study into eight. In only two more years, he would have graduated if he had kept going. But he had a wonderful time in college until the end of each semester rolled around. Then he would go to visit each of his professors and plead with them, "Don't give me justice, give me mercy." *Love* is not giving people what they deserve or desire; *love* is giving people what they need.

The Proof of Discipleship

Jesus told us another thing about love; it proves we are His disciples. Love enables people to tell whether or not we are Christians. It is the only sign we find in Scriptures that is universally applied to all Christians. How are we treating one another? Jesus spoke of this identifying mark of Christianity the night He was taken: "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 13:34-35). John wrote that down. He thought it was important.

John was one of the Sons of Thunder, and a son of thunder was not

characterized by love. On the contrary, he tended to blast off at people when he had the opportunity. John was changed radically when love became a characteristic of his life, and the whole concept electrified him. "Beloved," he said, "if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. . . . If any one says 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:11, 20-21). Love is something we will. It is something we do whether we feel like it or not. It is something that can be commanded.

During World War II in Rome, a Catholic priest in the Vatican was involved in smuggling Jews out of Rome to escape the gestapo. While the gestapo busily tried to track down the priest and uncover his network, he busily sent people to safety. The priest's work could be seen as an act of love, and indeed it was, but that was not the ultimate test of this priest's love. As the war came to an end and the Allied armies were grouped around Rome, the commander of the gestapo sent an agent to infiltrate the Vatican and bring out the priest. Instead of killing the priest, however, the gestapo commander asked a favor. He wanted the priest to smuggle his wife and children out of Rome to safety. He wanted the priest to save his family. The man who was responsible for sending hundreds upon hundreds of people to concentration camps and to death wanted the priest, whom he had tried to apprehend, to have mercy on his family. The priest was outraged by the idea. This monster who had shown no compassion now wanted mercy. The priest refused to help. The German's family could suffer the consequences of his life.

"So," the German said contemptuously, "there is nothing at all to this love you Christians talk about."

When the Allied troops entered Rome, they arrested the gestapo agent and interrogated him. They wanted to know the name of the mastermind behind the underground group that had smuggled his family out of the country. The German fell dumbfounded and silent, not knowing how to explain it. For the next fifteen years that priest came once a week to visit this gestapo commander in prison. Finally, after all those years, the commander accepted the rule of Jesus Christ as his Savior, yet he did not deserve mercy.

Jesus never gave us the option of deciding who does and who does

not deserve love and mercy. He came and died on the cross for the people of the world, none of whom deserve it, and He loves every creature on earth. God expects His children to have the same attitude He has. Love is not the warm feeling we have for the people close to us; it is what we do for the ones who do not deserve it.

The Bible teaches that bearing fruit involves both pruning and fertilizing. Those parts of us which are unwilling to love must be pruned before we can love as Christ commanded. The unwillingness to love may extend to other members of a church with whom personalities have clashed. It may extend to members of our family we cannot stand to be around. It may extend to people in the community we find irritating and obnoxious. It may extend to strangers who have committed the sin of being different from us. The attitude of unwillingness to love must be sacrificed to the Lord before love can blossom into fruit in the life of a Christian.

For the Spirit to enable us love, we must be fed. Fertilization needs to accompany pruning. Jesus told His disciples to gain this added strength, nourishment, and ability to love those who do not deserve it by praying for them. He gives us the unlikely instruction to pray for those who persecute us. Jesus knew the impossibility of praying for people without becoming concerned about them and involved with them. Prayer gives the power, strength, and ability for bearing the fruit of love which people cannot muster from their own resources. The command to love involves doing something divine, which is impossible without divine involvement.