

Love is a Skill

(From the Epistle: 1 St. John iii. 13 ff.)

13 Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. 14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. 15 Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. 16 Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. 19 And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. 20 For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. 21 Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. 22 And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. 23 And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. 24 And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.

What standards does God hold me to when it comes to fulfilling this commandment to *love*? Would He be content with mediocre attempts, where I exercised the minimal amount of effort? Would He let me get by with shoddy demonstrations of it? Would He be pleased if there seemed to be very little progress in the formation of this virtue over a lifetime of claiming faith in Him?

The answers to these questions, of course, are obvious. Although the ability to love is certainly a gift imparted by the Holy Spirit, it also a skill, the most important we will ever be called upon to perfect. To love God, and to love others. Though we should be absent every other attainment in life, if we excelled here, we would have reached a point beyond which there is no higher achievement. This is in fact the goal toward which all the sovereign energy of God in each of our lives is directing us. He uses every trial to this end, as well as every blessing. Love will survive every storm of circumstance. It is diminished neither by time nor age.

If love is indeed that supreme occupation to which each of us is called, we must seek above all things to learn more about it. I want to take a closer look, in hopes of assisting us in coming to terms with this greatest of commandments.

First, our maturity in love is determined by how we treat those we least esteem. That is the standard to which God holds us, because if we don't start there, we dare not imagine that we've gone anywhere. Jesus reproved His self-righteous listeners sternly on this score: *For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?* (Matt. 5:46). When we entered the Kingdom of God, we left our right to privacy at the doorway. God scrutinizes all things, and though I may get away with much before men, no detail escapes His notice: *Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and*

opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do (Hebrews 4:13). My actions are vividly on display, even the smallest, and I will be called back to them, sooner or later, until I have faced them.

I have often been reminded of this as a bus driver. How will I deal with each and every passenger? Suppose I am late, stressed, and have encountered many obstacles on a given day? Will each new face appearing before me at the bus door be content with my unkindness because I had what I fancied was a justifiable excuse to mistreat them? No, they won't know a thing about it, except how I deal with them each individually. Nor can they be expected to be concerned. Will the wheelchair client who has no control over his circumstances, nor any knowledge of those that have made my day a bad one, have any reason to accept the resentment he sees flitting on my face as I secure him on the bus? I must set all of that aside, and use that highly pressured moment to display God's character.

Love tells me that, contrary to popular wisdom, the end never justifies the means. I can never go around you to get to where I want to be. I may think I have succeeded in doing so, but at some point in time or in eternity I will be called back to that very place. *Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is* (1 Corinthians 3:13). Whatever has been accomplished upon earth, no matter how imposing, grand, or even how apparently righteous, if it has been done at the expense of the principle of love it cannot endure. It will lose all the esteem that men have heaped upon it.

We are tested continually here, especially in our most intimate relationships. No one really know how I treat my wife. No one will know what I really become when I am behind closed doors, and not obliged to keep up appearances. But God cannot be excluded from any interaction. He witnesses it, and assesses it, and if I am sensitive to my Christian conscience, my own heart will testify against it. If I am to excel at this thing called love, I must learn to do it everywhere, and always.

So closely does Jesus identify with His people that He considers everything done to them, whether good or bad, to be an action directed toward Himself. At the last judgment, He informs the righteous of all their good deeds personally and specifically directed toward Him. They are astonished, and ask when this could have happened. The Scripture continues: *And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me* (Matthew 25:40). And the obverse is true of the deeds of the wicked. Jesus answers them, as well: *Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me* (vs. 45).

My next point is that love obliges us to have an ever increasing capacity to be hurt. It is impossible to excel at love if we have surrounded ourselves with a battery of self-defense mechanisms, and are hiding behind sky-high walls that are designed to minimize the possibility of injury. We will never venture out, nor will anyone dare to get near. The one willing to be schooled in love finds himself being stripped slowly, inexorably of all those clever means of protection that most people have spent a lifetime inventing and improving upon. There he is, open, vulnerable, surely a target for painful attack, but with a heart so large that those fiery arrows aimed at him are quickly extinguished and disappear. Yes, he will surely be injured, and maybe even greatly so. There is no escaping it. But the result will only be more ability to love.

The greatest advances in God's work are made by those who have so opened themselves to life as to allow the dimensions of their heart to begin to assume the proportions of that belonging to our Lord. He made a choice to suffer out of love, and so must we. We will be defeated if we permit our experiences to so harden and embitter us that we become disqualified to represent Him. And we will be of no use to the expansion of God's Kingdom in these difficult times that are so opposed to our faith, if we resort to the wrong ways of dealing with them, whether it be isolating ourselves from them, or launching attacks against them. *Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.*

Finally, we have no greater example than our Lord to look to, for One skilled in love. Jesus never skirted a need in order to achieve an end. For Him, the end was in the meeting of needs. He looked no further. And He placed no arbitrary limits upon the amount of hurt He was willing to endure. *Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.*

Once, while driving the bus, I spotted a bumper-sticker that I haven't been able to forget: "Life is the school. Love is the lesson." How will I do in this school? Will I pass, or will I fail? Will I graduate with honors, or will its purpose for me have been entirely lost?

My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him...

And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.

In The Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.