

## THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

(Discourse below by Lawrence Kirkham, given at the Vancouver convention, Sunday, May 9, 1982.)

Shortly before Jesus' death, his foes, the Pharisees sent a clever lawyer to trap Jesus through subtlety: "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus ignored his malicious intent and turned the lawyer's guile into a positive digest of the true meaning and intent of God's law to Israel. "Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Matt. 22:36-40.

In response to serious problems in the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul penned his eloquent treatise on the superiority of love. Read 1 Cor. 13:1 to 13, New American Standard Bible. "But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." (1 Cor. 13:13) Paul writes to Timothy that the purpose of Christian instruction is to develop a proper principle and spirit of love in our hearts. "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart, and a good conscience and a sincere faith." 1 Tim. 1:5 (NASB) To this the Apostle Peter also agrees. Read 2 Pet. 1:2-11. (NASB) Peter lists unselfish agape love last because it is the sum of all graces and the most difficult to obtain.

What is love? Love is the great guiding principle that motivates all of God's plans, purposes and actions. It is the greatest of all God's attributes of justice, love, wisdom and power. Wisdom and power are qualities of God's character, but they are not principles. Wisdom and power made it possible for God to create the universe, but they did not motivate him to do so. The principle of justice assures that God is just and fair in all his dealings, but justice did not motivate God to share the blessings of life with others. Love alone motivated God to create other creatures similar to himself and to bless them beyond all comprehension. Love alone makes God kind, generous, benevolent, understanding, patient, forgiving, helpful, unselfish, thoughtful and good. Love is so much the predominant quality of God's character, that the Apostle declares that GOD IS LOVE. 1 John 4:8.

No matter what else we may be, or whatever we may accomplish in life, if we have not love in its fullest sense, then we are not truly godlike and godlikeness is our only worthwhile goal.

God's love is shown everywhere. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night

sheweth knowledge.” (Psa. 19:1, 2) God’s creative works clearly demonstrate his limitless wisdom and power. The almost endless variety of pleasing plants and creatures literally shout forth that GOD IS LOVE! God fills man’s life with pleasures of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Animals are limited in their food, clothing and shelter. Man is almost unlimited. It could be very different. One food could keep us alive. One coat could keep us warm. White, dark and grays could give us sight. Etc....

Our immense capacity for deriving pleasure from our surroundings, possessions and activities declares the magnitude of God’s love toward us. There is nothing mean or niggardly about our God. His generosity is beyond understanding. Wisdom and power accomplished it. Love dictated it.

The greatness of God’s love is shown in his treatment of his enemies and the breakers of his laws. “Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren, only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” Matt. 5:43-48

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” John 3:14-17.

Not only does God continue to provide the life needs of his enemies and lawbreakers, but he also provides a marvelously constructed plan of deliverance. He loves them so much that he is willing to give his most treasured possession, even his only begotten son to suffer and die for them. This is the kind of love to which we aspire.

Notice the symbolisms here of the sun and the rain, for they speak of the two salvations. The unjust have not yet received of the healing rays of the sun of righteousness nor have they been cleansed by waters of truth. However, in the resurrection of the just and the unjust, then the unjust will share in the benefits of the symbolic sun and rain. “Resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.” (Acts 24:15) “All that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth.” (John 5:28)

Jesus, like the Father has this great unselfish love. “I am the bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” (John 6:48-51) “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13.

On the evening of Jesus’ death, after partaking of the typical passover lamb, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment. “Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me; and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you, A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” John 13:33-35.

To illustrate this love in a most dramatic fashion, he washed their feet. “So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord; and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.” John 13:12-17.

In leaving this commandment to the last, Jesus emphasized its importance. Do we have this kind of love? Are we keeping the great commandment? How can we judge ourselves, that we be not judged? Love is a principle, an attribute, a disposition, a spirit. It is not something that we can lay our hands on and say, “Here it is, I have it.” But it is not hard to tell whether we have the love of God. Love is known by its actions. What we do, what we say, even what we think clearly tells us whether we have love or not. Are we laying down our lives day by day for others? Then we are practicing godlike love. Are we generous in sharing with others?—our time, our thoughts, our knowledge, our sympathy, our energy, our homes, our cars, our food, our money, etc., as good stewards of what God has delivered into our hands? If so, we are practicing godlike love. Do we suffer wrong patiently without retaliation? Do we even love and do good to our enemies? Then we are practicing godlike love. Do we think kindly and generously toward others? Do we think how we can help them and not be a hindrance? Then we are practicing godlike love. Do we quickly grasp opportunities to help others as they arise, especially the brethren? Then we are practicing godlike love. 1 John 3:16-24.

Practicing godlike love will so imbue us with the spirit of love that it will eventually become so much a part of our very being that this principle of love will dictate our every

action with little or no conscious effort on our part. It will become natural to us, our very way of life and thought.

However, works, even good works, do not alone indicate love. Good works must be accompanied by the fruits of the spirit to indicate love. “If I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.” (1 Cor. 13:1-3) Why? Because love is the only acceptable motivation in God’s service. Thus many have supposedly labored for God, to whom God will say, I know thee not.

The works that are acceptable to God and in turn make other works acceptable are listed by Paul. “Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails...” (1 Cor. 13:4-8) These are harder works. “Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” 1 Cor. 13:13.

Satan is the master deceiver. He puts darkness for light, evil for good, unrighteousness for righteousness. He does this with great skill. He would distract us from that which is most important and absolutely essential to our overcoming to pursue matters of less or no importance. Such neglect, if persisted in, will surely lead to disaster, as Paul indicates. He may suggest the ignoring the standards of righteousness, of doing evil that good may result. He may suggest the minimizing of truth or righteousness under the guise of love. He may seek to distract us from God’s word to other so-called authorities. Whatever he does will be slick and devious. “The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were as drawn swords.” “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.” Psalm 55:22.

True love loves righteousness and acts wisely. True love will never intentionally do anything unjust. True love will never intentionally do anything foolish. True love for God and for His son will be manifested by a burning love and devotion to the commandments of His word. “... if a man loves me, he will keep my words; and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.” (John 14:23) “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be

desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned; and in keeping of them there is great reward. Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me; then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.” (Psalm 19:7 to 14)

“Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart; for I am called by thy name, O Lord God of hosts.” (Jer. 15:16) Respect and love for God means respect and love for God’s word and commandments. Respect and love for God will make us careful doers of the word. “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.” James 1:22-25.

As we develop a true spirit of love through careful attention to and sincere compliance with God’s word, many wonderful benefits come to us as new creatures in Christ Jesus. A marvelous transformation takes place that leads to newness of life. One of these great benefits is the elimination of fear in our lives and the development of a great sense of peace. “And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as he is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.” (1 John 4:16-18) “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:6, 7) Fear and love can not exist in our hearts at the same time. If we fear, love departs. If we love, fear departs. Perfect love casts out fear. If we truly love God above all else, then we will fully trust him and not fear what men shall do unto us. Love will assure us that God can care for us under all circumstances. “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Because love is concerned with the highest welfare of others, love may sometimes seem unkind in the short term. Many a child has accused his parents of not loving him because the parent would not give the child what he wanted, only to realize later that the parent knew best. Thus God’s love is shown in adversity because God’s love is interested in the

long term, the eternal welfare of his people. God wounds to bless. “And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him; for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?... Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” Heb. 12:5 to 7, 11.

It is not unkind to restrict sweets to children. It is not unkind to restrict potentially harmful activities. It is not unkind to make men work for their living. It is not unkind to execute murderers. It is not unkind to make men experience the dreadful results of sin. It is not unkind to limit man’s life to 70 years. The present troubles that man is experiencing through the fall have been designed by God’s love and wisdom to work for man’s highest welfare if he is rightly exercised by them. God is love, and God is kind. But most men can not understand this now for they are children in understanding. In God’s kingdom of righteousness they will have the eyes of their understanding opened and then illuminated by the light of the millennial age, they will praise God with their whole heart fervently. The permission of evil will then be seen as the master stroke of wisdom from the loving kindness of our great Creator.

What is the greatest principle? The principle of love. Love is greater than justice, because love is always just, but justice is not always loving. Love is concerned about the best interests of one’s fellows, family, friends and neighbors. Love does them good in the highest sense. Therefore, love assures that all our actions will be just, honest and fair. It does this better than any written law, “for love worketh no ill to his neighbor.” The written law is also designed to accomplish this. But in actual practice the proliferation of laws confuses and delays justice, so that the simplest of matters cannot be quickly and fairly judged. It is difficult or impossible for the average man to obtain justice in our present legal system. Love makes legal systems unnecessary, for “love worketh no ill to his neighbor.” Where no ill is, no law is needed, since the purpose of the law is to determine guilt, assign punishment and correct wrongs. “Owe no man any thing, but to love one another; for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Rom. 13:8-10.

Soon, when the great law of love is thoroughly written and tested in the hearts of the bride of Christ, the Lord will turn to writing this law in the hearts of all mankind. “But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be

their God, and they shall be my people.” “And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying Know the Lord; for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Jer. 31:33, 34. First to Israel, and then to all mankind will flow the blessings of this the greatest commandment.

The time is short, the days are evil. The great time of trouble in which the world finds itself is swiftly drawing to its climax. Let us do with our might what our hands find to do. Let us be busy preparing our hearts, for greater tests may lie before us.

“Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” Gal. 6:7-10

“But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the holy spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” Jude 20, 21.