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Love is Existential: Religious Existentialism II

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By Mildred Bangs Wynkoop*

II. Love Is Existential

"What is the first commandment?"

JESUS' COMMAND that we love the Lord our God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength puts the Christian life into the plane where we all live. It is not merely a command or an intellectual proposition to be accepted, a theory to be believed, or some idea to be taken "by faith." It is not the recognition of the reality of a new legal standing before God nor is it the cover of an imputed righteousness. It is not an impossible standard imposed upon fallible human nature nor is it the denial of human nature. There is nothing artificial or stilted or unrealistic about this command. It is a most practical matter and one that makes a difference in the commonest areas of daily life. It speaks of the moral atmosphere out of which life with all of its phases is lived.

It is significant that Jesus never pressed His claims on people by means of some abstract or theological term. Every appeal was to the deepest moral commitment, through a deliberate decision, to obedience, to self-giving, to love, to purity, to an expendable life. Always the challenge was in terms of a personal relation to a concrete situation. In some specific way the obligation to believe on Him was a

soul-shocking demand that a prior commitment to sin—a conscious sin—be repudiated down to the deepest human level and that Christ be put at the center of life. This commitment was to be dynamic in that a new course of life and motivation ensued. A belief that stayed in the head and did not reach the hands and feet was not the faith that Jesus talked about.

When we stand beside the questioning scribe and face the answer which Jesus gave to the question (Mark 12: 29-31), we find we cannot analyze it—"exegete" it—altogether objectively. Strangely we find ourselves implicated in the affair. The question is ours whether we asked it or not because it is the question lying at the very heart of human existence. We are compelled to make a decision with the young scribe because Truth, in the person of Christ, confronts us and we cannot be neutral about Him. We cannot stand outside this environment and make judgments; we *are inside it*, and our involvement in the story implicates us in a moral decision of our own.

1. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart."

This is the law of love. But an existential interpretation of "perfect love" does not see law primarily as an imposition of external obligations upon us. Rather it is a dynamic

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principle of life and love to God that proceeds from the deepest depth of human personality up and out to the farthest edge of everything we do. To love with the heart is the whole man integrated about a chosen object. The heart is often considered the center of the emotional life. It, of course, includes the emotions; but in the Bible it means much more—it signifies a depth of personality beyond and underneath the emotions and will and motives. The heart is the mainspring of life which determines the character of everything we think and do. It is a moral commitment that establishes the moral environment of the whole man. We *must* love something. We are not free not to love. We were made for God, Augustine saw, and are complete only when we find our completion in Him. It is “natural” to love God in that He is the only proper object of our human need. In fellowship with God is holiness. Loss of fellowship means that our object of affection and trust is an idol and moral life is corrupted at its source. Alienation from God’s fellowship is itself sin because the break is moral and deliberate.

Love is not a passive sentiment but the principle of moral action. It is a self-initiated commitment which issues in inevitable fruit. Also in Mark’s Gospel is Jesus’ contrast to love to God (7:21-22): “From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, etc.” The deeply moral nature of the heart’s love is indicated by the attitude Jesus took to those whose commitment He condemned or approved. Love is a moral man’s responsible, personal commitment. Its opposite is also a moral man’s responsibility.

To love with the whole of the heart means that a civil revolution has taken place in the center of our beings which has dethroned selfishness and “my-

way-ish-ness” and has enthroned Christ as Lord. This revolution is always bloody. Somebody dies a violent death. Negatively it always involves a crucifixion of every false object of affection, the self included. Invariably it occurs in a moment of the most profound obedience. It is probably never an abstract promise of obedience, “I’ll do what You want me to do, dear Lord,” but always a concrete example of obedience which must be acted upon, immediately. It may seem a very small thing we have to do, but it is always a very touchy and even a painful thing which will be seen later to run directly to the main artery of the spiritual heart. It is a shock to dethrone self—but Jesus’ existential interpretation of law remains a judgment over us—not a consolation, until that crucial task is done.

But love is positive too. It is always an outflowing of life’s energies. Love is movement. It is not passive and static, but a quality that colors everything we do. Love, as a principle, cannot be defined or located. Love, as a verbal profession, does not distinguish one person from another. But love lived out of the whole heart gives a fragrance to life that cannot be hidden. It becomes an inner norm by which distinctions are made between the good and the best. It clothes crude, imperfect conduct and faltering service with a winsomeness, a loveliness that is always the hallmark of a true Christian. There is no bitterness in love. There is no edginess in it or vindictiveness or duplicity of motive. It is clean, though imperfect. It is shot through with good will, though not always with good sense. It loves the law of God, though it may not always know precisely what the particulars of that law may be. In a word, love out of the whole heart is the exact antithesis of love of self. Its full trust is in God, not self; and

in deepest, truest humility it lays its affections unreservedly on God and expresses that sentiment in its relationships in the world of men. People are important and to be loved because God loves them and the Spirit of God sheds God's love into our hearts. The question of how to express that love is a complex ethical problem which must not be too easily dismissed. But what Jesus is talking here is a more fundamental commitment which makes the solving of ethical problems a possibility.

2. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . with all thy soul [life]."

There is a danger in too limited an understanding of holiness, so that we begin to live uncriticized lives. The goal of the sanctified life is too easily reached, the ceiling too low. We take comfort in a creed and shield ourselves from the obligation to expansion and its consequent obligation to occupy the expanded areas. There are too many people who consider sanctification the end, the goal of life, instead of the beginning of life, the moral minimum, the spiritual commencement. The proper comment is not, "Thank God, I have arrived," but, "Lord, what now? What do we do next?" There may be developed a Wesleyan security that has as much to condemn it as Calvinistic security. There is a point in each that gives deep confidence in God, but the next step into careless complacency is as disastrous in one as in the other. Spiritual indifference is a major problem where the proper perspective of the sanctified experience is not clearly understood.

We stress experience and well we should. But faith must never rest in an experience. It must rest in God, who demands that faith put on running shoes to keep up with God's demands. Experience is *mitiation*. It begins something not to be terminated

in this life. Loving with the whole soul (life, in Greek) is the investment of a life, not divesting of life. Its perspective is all future with only enough past to keep the lines straight.

Comfortable Christians in a church do not represent the "growing edge" of the church. Jesus' existential interpretation of the law neatly annihilates complacency. He confronts men with a commission sanctioned with a moral challenge that is not discharged, at least until death terminates the human capacity to grow. New Testament analogies of the norm for Christian life are perhaps never drawn from static existence. Even the stones of which Peter speaks are "lively" or living "stones." The rigid, cold, formal, though fixed, quality of concrete is not a Biblical picture. Rubber, with its deceptively mobile quality, is not a scriptural figure. Rubber accepts imposed configurations without resistance but snaps back to its dead formalism when the external impulse is relaxed. Corpses are not proper analogies, for all the perfection of their poise and imperturbability. The New Testament makes *life* the analogy. Life is a vital quality, beset by risk, unpredictableness, and irrepressible variety. Life cannot be externally uniformed and regimented successfully without losing its peculiar value as life. The sanctified life, to satisfy the New Testament demands, must be a living, vital, dynamic heart pumping fresh blood into the farthest extremities of an expanding personality. It is life in Christ, but it is also life in Christ lived to the finger tips.

All human potential is God-given. Sanctified responsibility includes the stewardship of this potential. The world puts a tremendous premium on human ability and pays high prices for its development and utilization. Jesus indicates that a man's Christian obligation is not satisfied before God

until the fullest measure of life's capacities have been exploited in God's service. There is no place for hidden talents, for thwarted energies, for dwarfed and stifled creativeness, in God's economy. To love God with the whole of the life means more than maintaining an easily defensible *status quo*. It means the lifelong vocation of expressing love for God in every possible area of our expanding personalities, whether in very hidden and intimate ways or very open and observed ways. It is love *lived*.

3. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . with all thy mind."

Loving God with the whole mind is putting at God's disposal all the intellectual faculties with which we are endowed. It has to do with ability to understand truth. It involves all our capacities for rational thinking and spiritual insights. Love from the whole mind is not a cheap and easy mental assent to truth, after which all curiosity and mental alertness and desire for learning is stilled. It is not the disposition to throw on the Lord the full obligation of filling our gaping mouths with overwhelming brilliance in the hour of service. Loving God with the mind is inconsistent with a closed mind, a mind which rejects investigation and inquiry and fails to seek the fullest possible development of every ability to think properly. God gave man a rational nature as the only reliable way by which He could reveal himself to man. Emotions cannot be the avenue or source of revelation. Emotions prompt actions but cannot define their own impulses or interpret truth. The will cannot create truth. The will can only force decisions presented by the mind; never can it stand in judgment over truth. The mind alone is the thread linking God to man. The stewardship of mental development, then, is a moral obligation upon us:

for only as we nourish this area into full maturity can God make himself known to us maturely and use us as proper instruments for the Kingdom. God has been forced to forge out sections of the Kingdom with blunted, twisted mental tools for lack of ready men and women, and the result is often a distorted segment of the Kingdom. This existential interpretation of perfect love stands in grim judgment over any indolence on my part as to my stewardship over my mind.

Loving God with the whole mind involves a passionate endeavor to sharpen that rational tool to its keenest edge. It means that no shoddy, bluffing approach to learning will ever be permitted. It means that we live in the constant awareness that we will be required to give an account of our use of our minds. Did we muff an opportunity to make a proper and wise and tactful answer to some inquirer after Christ, because we had not adequately prepared our minds to serve God? Then our guilt is great and our repentance must include renewed preparation and discipline. The man or woman who fails to love God with his whole mind can no more expect God to use him greatly or bless him in service or provide him with a depth of understanding of the Scriptures, or even to keep him in the center of God's will in life, than one who fails to love God with his whole heart. The Spirit of Truth, who sanctifies, leads us into all truth. He never implants it or drives us into it or violates in any way man's own initiative in the matter of learning. If we do not keep step with the Spirit of Truth we stand in danger of losing His presence.

When I say, "I love the Lord supremely," do I mean that I actually do love Him enough to give Him as well a prepared mental instrument as

it is in my power to provide? Can I honestly say I love Him and fail in this matter? Perfect love—or sanctification—had in it—not as a rider in the contract, but as a main obligation printed in large type—the lifelong obligation to conscientiously keep a well-disciplined and well-stocked and well-sanctified intelligence through which God could work. Have I kept my part of the contract?

4. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . with all thy strength."

As a hand would be quite useless without an arm, and a head would be incompetent without a body, so would a religious sentiment or profession of faith be without the co-operation of the whole of a man's personality and physical being. For lack of natural and spiritual vigor, Christian faith must suffer. It does not take great strength to believe a proper doctrine, but Jesus seemed to be saying that the life of perfect love requires as a minimal demand the harnessing of all of a believer's resources. All the motors into which human life is geared must operate at full capacity. Sentiment must issue in fruitfulness. Profession of grace must not be a paper flower tied to a branch, but a bursting out and expression of the very nature of the plant. The last stand of professionalism or spiritual complacency is invaded and judged by Jesus' interpretation of the law.

Whatever else may be indicated by this interpretation, the fact that progress in Christian life is not automatic but deliberate is obvious. Loss of capital and disintegration of assets, in the realms of both the material and the intellectual, accompany indifference or any relaxed attentiveness. In spiritual things the same law of death takes over when the law of life is violated. To love God with the whole of one's strength puts a practicality

into religious profession that saves it in every instance from unwholesome introspection and detachment from life. It emphasizes the fact that the whole of man's attention and the whole of his moral responsibility must be consciously enlisted in the matter of love to God. Love must be cultivated, nurtured, disciplined. Jesus is saying, it seems, that sanctity is not anemic but virile and utterly congenial to humanhood as such and must exist concomitantly with human life.

When all our strength is occupied in expressing our love to God, there is nothing left in time or capacity or possession or desire left to vitiate that love. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that of the two alternatives—complete separation of the secular from the religious (and a denial of the secular, or the sanctification of the secular to religious ends—it is the latter which is Jesus' way. The whole of life—everything involved in human strength, starkly necessary duties, duties incident upon responsibility to any other human being, whether in the family, society, or business, pleasurable and elective engagements—is to express love for God. And that love for God must be expressed to the peak of human capacity—"with all thy strength." Everything that requires strength is involved, for all the strength is involved and with it the whole man putting feet and hands and deliberate attention to his love to God.

It need not be a serious charge that no man can perfectly express this love to God. It is not Biblical teaching that the whole potential of a man's strength is realized at any moment in life. What is required is *all* we have at any one moment. The available strength will be relative to the day and circumstance. The "all" demanded is the absolute possibility in any relative moment.