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Practical Norm of Love: Religious Existentialism III

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III. Practical Norm of Love

By Mildred Bangs Wynkoop*

"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

When one encounters the moral demand of the New Testament a number of possible personal reactions occur. The limitations of human life, the fallibility, the ignorance, the stupidity, and humanness of men seem to cancel out any possibility of real approximation to the ideal. When the normal self-assertiveness and self-interest and the human demands incident upon any kind of wholesome self-identity are defined as sin, then the utter foolishness of taking Jesus' remarks seriously is the only reasonable response. Perhaps, we hear someone say, this ideal is set before us, not to actually keep, but to remind us of our inability in this respect. It will serve to rob us of any measure of self-assurance or pride and it will keep us on our knees asking for forgiveness. Others consider the very attempt to keep this commandment a sin in that no inherently sinful human being is able to aspire to such holiness with any but sinful motives. Some, alas, out of desperation and loyalty to a theology, attempt to resolve the contradiction between perfection and human ability by interpreting anything one does as pleasing to God.

It seems only proper to assume real, moral seriousness of the Bible and

God's message in it. To give ground here would put one in the impossible position of having to interpret subjectively all the moral commands in the light of human capacity and deciding which were serious and which were not. Moreover, there seems no good reason for rejecting the universal Biblical call to right living and personal responsibility to God. In the Bible there is clearly a positive call to moral decision. What then is the solution?

The principle of God's dealing with men and the secret of the moral life are in this fact, namely, that there are no abstract commands. Wherever a principle is given there is also a human application. Nothing is ever required that is out of keeping with humanhood. We are never left with impersonal law but always with a practical application with which to contend. Had we been left with the first part of the commandment alone without the "second, like to it," precisely this dilemma would have confronted us.

Here has been outlined the most thoroughgoing commitment to a governing center that could be devised for human beings. Here is total integration. Here is moral decision that, so far as is humanly possible, is absolute. And the center is "the Lord thy God." But a problem arises as we attempt to conceptualize "God"

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and make of Him the effective Object of our love. Abstraction here is fatal to real love, for love is not an abstraction. It is here that an unrealness is apt to overwhelm us and rob us of contact with significance and purpose, and leave us to flounder and often fall. We make the total commitment, gear all of life into that commitment, cultivate every capacity to its highest effectiveness, feel the throb and splendor of a perfect love to God, and yet are thwarted and finally defeated for lack of an adequate outlet.

To love God as described above is "the *great*" commandment. It is "first" because it is the fundamental commandment, the one underlying all others. But there is a second—not distinct from, but arising out of, the first—which becomes the outward expression of the first and gives evidence of the love which is professed. In fact, so important is the second to the first that John, in developing his doctrine of the Christian life (I John), states boldly that a profession of love for God without the expression of it as designated in the second command constitutes a practical denial of that love. The gentle John states that such a failure reveals the professor as a "liar." This is a hard word and a penetrating moral criticism.

"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." This is the test and measure of love to God. It, in the most fundamental way, evidences the sincerity of our love. It also gives it concrete and wholesome content. Had not this description of *agape* been given to us, Christian ethics would have been left dangerously subjective and abstract, dangerous because abstraction cancels out love. The second commandment is the test of the keeping of the first. The first without the second would be illusion; the second without the first is impossible. The first describes an attitude toward God; the

second, communication with man. The first is love without reserve, without qualification, without limitation—absolute, insofar as men may use that term. The second is love in relation. The first, alone, could issue in vapid mysticism and isolationism, for it has no boundaries. The second, alone, would issue in a shallow humanism, for its boundaries are fixed and the source of its power limited and perverted. Together the abstractions and relations of human life issue in wholesome living because the eternal dimension and perspective can be related and tested by temporal and concrete concerns.

But there is still another challenge and safeguard. A total love for others could be and has been misunderstood. An undisciplined love for others is as harmful to the recipient as it is disastrous to the one who offers love. Unstructured love has no character. It produces indolence in others and a violated personality and weakened integrity in the giving self. Jesus said, "Love others as you love yourself," and thereby brought into Christian experience content and direction, balance and power.

The commandment, as absolute as the first, touches the quick. We may glibly profess love to God and remain beyond the judgment of men, but this demand becomes a judgment day before the great day of Judgment. If perfect love includes an expression of love recognizable to others, equal to the esteem in which we hold ourselves, then any cheap glibness is taken from our witnessing. A Christian will listen kindly to reasoning and acknowledge his faults and lack of graciousness. He will contribute peace and gentleness to a tense, explosive situation. He will honor his obligations, financial, social, in business, and at home. He will be scrupulously honest with time, money,

confidences, opportunities, and responsibilities. If he does not, his profession of divine grace is a lie, to use John's term.

A Christian who professes perfect love will establish and maintain communication with all men insofar as it is in his power to do so. He will cultivate friendship as he desires others to seek him out. He will not withdraw from the concerns of men. He will identify himself with them, as men, and let flow out of him the fullest measure of the sharing of himself and his Christ possible in any given situation. He will not draw his skirts about him and retire from life, but will gird himself with the towel of service and plunge his hands into the task needing to be done. If he does not, Jesus' existential interpretation of the law robs him of the right to profess a love to God, perfect love, holiness.

The existential emphasis on love demands a revolution of that which we have called love heretofore. Love as profound respect for ourselves in the wholly proper sense, and love to God as evidenced in the total devotement of all the capacities and areas of that self to Him, can still be introspective, self-seeking, and perverted if it be not poured out concretely into the lives of others. Love to God is tested and measured by our love to our neighbor.

When have I fulfilled the command? Not simply when I am no longer human and have no more capacity to change, expand, push into new depths and heights of personality development and spiritual insight. Jesus was interested in the warm, rich humanhood of the persons to whom He spoke. One who has committed himself wholly to God and who maintains that commitment (for this is a living relation, not an a-personal one) and who keeps a whole-

some balance between self-esteem and other-esteem, so far as God is concerned, has fulfilled the law. This does not mean that one's best today is good enough for tomorrow. It means that the top moral capacity is required at any one moment, no more, no less. This does not leave us with an impossible ideal but one that requires of us all we can contribute of moral responsibility and integrity.
