

Can Love Be Commanded?

Mark 12:28-34

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What is the greatest commandment? You know. The greatest is to love God with everything you are, and the second, which Jesus seems to make equal, is to love your neighbor as yourself. The most fundamental ethical duty we have is to love. But how can love be commanded? How can love be a duty?

We take it for granted that love is an emotion that we either have or don't have. We treat it as a matter of taste. Our intern from Tennessee announced that she just didn't like seafood—on Block Island! She couldn't help it, she thought; her tongue was just made that way. We think that love is like that, because our idea of love is rooted in liking: you either love someone or you don't. As the French say, *Chacun son gout*, to each his taste. One of my first dates with Becca I took her to a Japanese restaurant for sushi, back when sushi was a novelty in America, because I could not possibly love someone who didn't like sushi. But you see how hypocritical I was: I wanted someone who did not set narrow limits on what she liked, but I had set narrow limits on who I would love.

One of my favorite heartbreak songs is one from Bonny Raitt:

I can't make you love me if you don't.

You can't make your heart feel something it won't.

Here in the dark, in these final hours

I will lay down my heart and I'll feel the power

But you won't, no you won't,

'Cause I can't make you love me if you don't.

Are we helpless when it comes to love? Is love something into which we fall, or is love something we choose? Can you make yourself love someone?

Obviously Jesus believes that we are not helpless, or he would not repeat the commandments to love or give the "new commandment" to love one another. He seems to believe that we can choose to love. Preaching professor Fred Craddock asks

But what if love is not an emotion? What if love is the way God acts toward the world and the way Jesus acts toward his disciples? In that case we are talking about telling the truth, being faithful in sharing the word of God, continuing to care for those who may not be responsive, and, if need be, giving one's life. If this is love, then the word of Jesus here moves us out of naming our feelings and tinkering with our psyches and into speaking and doing for another [*John*, 1982, p. 107].

We heard from First John that love is not really about words but about action. Love is something you do.

It would be easy to solve the problem of love being commanded in the Bible if you could say that that the Bible uses a different word in the command than the word used for the Bonny Raitt kind of love. Actually, scholars used to say something like this. There was a very famous book written in the 1930's by a Swedish theologian named Anders Nygren, called *Agape and Eros*. The thesis was that these were two completely different—almost opposite—phenomena. *Eros* was possessive and self-centered, while *agape* was selfless and other-centered. The love in the Bible was all about *agape*.

Then there was a distinction made between *philia*, brotherly love—like Philadelphia—which was based on commonality and attraction, versus *agape* as being spontaneous and not based on any quality of the one loved. You've probably heard a sermon on the questions Jesus asked Peter after the resurrection: Do you love me, with *agape*, two times, then do you love me with *philia*—if you're not

capable of the higher love, at least do that. Unfortunately this all turned out to be based on false distinctions. Even within John's gospel, John seems to use *agape* and *philia* interchangeably. If you look at the literature of the period, the difference between the two is not all that clear. And it's not true, as some have said, that *agape* was a seldom used word that Paul and other Christians adopted and gave their own meaning. It had meant love for a long time. And as to the distinction between *agape* and *eros*, that book has pretty much been debunked, too, as it's been made clear that *eros* was not understood as being as selfish as Nygren thought, and selfless love was not a concept that was made up by the Christians and foreign to Jews and Greeks.

It is true that the word *agape* is used in the New Testament in the commands to love God and love your neighbor and love one another. It's true that we are not being commanded to love romantically or sexually, of course. But it's not true that the kind of love that is commanded has absolutely nothing to do with the love that we have for spouses or partners or chocolate. In Hebrew the verb "love" has the same range that it has in English. Even though he wrote a book called *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis said that there is some wisdom in the English language's emphasis on the unity of our loves. In Hebrew the word used for loving God is the same word for the love between a man and a woman, or the love between close friends, or the love between parents and children. In addition, though, the word "love" is used to express political loyalty to a ruler or an ally. Love can be an expression of loyalty to a covenant.

What Jesus calls the greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength," is part of a prayer that Jews in his time and to this day pray several times a day. It is called the *Shema*, and it begins, "Hear [*Shema*] O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." That could also be read "Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone." That command to love God with all your being is a command to be loyal to Yahweh against all other small-g gods. The other nations around them believed in many gods, gods of the forces of nature, gods of various ethnic groups, and gods in conflict with one another, sometimes creators versus destroyers, good versus evil. But Israel had been shown that their God, the one who saved them from slavery, was the creator of the whole world, not a being limited to helping Israel. The Torah and (even more) prophets like the second Isaiah emphasize that the God who saved them is the God of the whole world and the God of all nations. That was radical thinking in a world of tribal deities.

So the first of the Ten Commandments is this one: "You shall have no other gods before me"—or that can be read "no other gods besides me." *The Message* translates it "No other gods, only me." The issue in loving God is not so much a question of stirring yourself up to feel something or having your heart strangely warmed. It's mainly an issue of being loyal to the real God instead of going after all the fake gods. I like Paul Tillich's definition of faith as your "ultimate concern." If something other than the real God, the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ, is your ultimate concern, then you have another god. If it's money you're after, that's your god. That's why Jesus said "You cannot serve God and Money." If it's national glory that is your ultimate concern, then you have another god. That's why Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's (his currency) but give to God what is God's (your self)."

God clearly assumes that we can choose who our God will be. We can decide to put ourselves on the throne, and we can decide to make God's reign our aim. When you do that, Jesus says, everything else will take care of itself. Becca found an old *Broadman Hymnal* yesterday, a Southern Baptist hymnal published in 1940. I was flipping through it looking for songs I hadn't heard in a long time. One of them was the song *Loyalty to Christ*, apparently written as a song for youth in 1921. It keeps repeating the phrase, "Loyalty, loyalty, yes, loyalty to Christ." It sounds old-fashioned now, doesn't it? That's an old virtue, the virtue of lifelong faithfulness to the one to whom you have made a commitment. But that is the greatest commandment. To love God is to be loyal to God, to keep God first in your life. It's not so much about passion as about loyalty.

So that's the first commandment, but what about the second that is like it? Maybe God can command us to love *him*, but can he command us to love neighbors we don't even like?

Jesus is quoting from Leviticus 19:18, so I'd like to go back to that. It comes in a chapter describing what it means to be holy as God is holy. Listen to the whole of verse 18: *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.* One way of defining love of neighbor would be to state its opposite. The opposite of love is getting revenge or paying back a wrong—or even holding a grudge. One of my Old Testament professors [Katherine Sakenfeld in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, "Love in the Old Testament"] said about this verse "Love is an attitude of heart to be demonstrated by the way one handles disagreements and hurts perpetuated by others." If you hold a grudge against your ex, or someone who has insulted you, or someone who fired you, or even someone who stole from you, you are violating the command to love your neighbor as yourself. So to some extent, it *is* a matter of emotion, isn't it?

But when Jesus talks to a religious scholar about the meaning of loving your neighbor, he tells a story about religious people walking by the wounded and someone from outside the faith acting in love. While in Leviticus the word "neighbor" means a fellow Israelite, Jesus expands it by making the hero of the story a Samaritan, a despised foreigner. A neighbor is whoever is near you and in need, and love is not a feeling you get when you see hurting people on TV. Love is when you get up and help them.

If you read in Leviticus down near the end of chapter 19, you'll find another expansion of the idea of neighbor:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. [19:33-34]

Talk about a "ripped from the headlines" Bible verse! I'd like to see that commandment posted on the wall of the House of Representatives. You shall love the alien as yourself. You shall treat the alien as if he were a citizen. You Americans were once strangers in a strange land yourselves; you were all aliens once—we all came from somewhere else—so you of all people ought not to oppress aliens in your midst.

So even in Leviticus the command to love your neighbor Israelite as yourself is expanded to include the alien. Jesus takes it one step further in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

God loves everybody. He blesses the evil as well as the good. Why should you be more discriminating than God?

But who can obey a command like that: to love people who hate you? Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher in the mid-19th century, wrote a book on that issue called *Works of Love*. He contrasted the idea of love as described by a poet with the idea of love in Christianity. "Let a poet describe what erotic love in a person must be if it is to be called erotic love. He will say... 'there must be admiration; the lover must admire the beloved.' The neighbor, however, has never been presented as an object of admiration. Christianity has never taught that one must admire his neighbor—one shall *love* him" [p. 66f]. When we are drawn to someone in erotic love or friendship, there is always self-love involved. We find something of ourselves in the other person, or we want to protect that part of ourselves which is aroused by the other person, or we see how that person could enrich our life in some way. But the love of neighbor that God commands has no self-interest involved at all. The other person

may be repulsive or mean to us or indifferent. The object makes no difference. The command is the same.

The key point that Kierkegaard makes is that the very fact that love is a commandment and not an emotion is what sets us free. "Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secured against every change, eternally made free in blessed independence, eternally and happily secured against despair." When we fall in love with someone our imagination thinks that the love is eternal, but because that love is not grounded on the eternal it can be changed. It depends on qualities of the other person, and our own feelings, and circumstances. But when it is a duty to love, love is eternally secure. We can love with perfect security because we know that the love that comes from God and is commanded by God cannot change. "Such a love stands and does not fall with variations in the object of love; it stands and falls with eternity's law, but therefore it never falls."

Besides that, the love that we are commanded to have and act on is love that is brought into being by what God has done for us. God has loved us, rescued us, and forgiven us. That creates a new situation. It frees us from love-hunger and neediness. It creates in us the capacity to forgive. Kierkegaard made a similar point: "Worldly wisdom thinks that love is a relationship between man and man. Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: man-God-man, that is, that God is the middle term" [p.112]. First John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us."