

Visible Christianity

by Ray C. Stedman

One often hears today the saying that Christianity has been rejected by the world on the basis of a caricature which has been mistaken for the real thing. We 20th century Christians tend to say that as though it had never happened before. But we need to realize this is something that has been true ever since the 1st century and is not new at all. We have seen it in a new form, perhaps, in our own generation, but the phenomenon is a common one and has been true in every century. The work of the devil is always to distort and to twist truth, and to make it appear something which it is not. This, of course, is what we are experiencing today.

Now it is the ministry of the Apostle John to call us back to original things, to foundations, to fundamental issues, to repair that which is broken. This is clearly evident in this first letter, as John is correcting the twisted caricature of Christianity which existed in his day, and exists equally in our day. If you know the real, you will be able to detect the false and twisted form:

- The caricature, for instance, says that Christianity is primarily a religion concerned about the behavior of men. But as we see in Scripture, the real form of Christianity indicates that its primary concern is not with behavior at all, but with being, with character, from which all behavior must ultimately come.
- The caricature tells us that Christianity's attitude toward life is essentially negative – don't do this, don't do that, stop doing this, stop doing that. That is the view of Christian faith held by the average man on the street. But the real, genuine article says that in Christ we are discovering the secret of the fullest, freest, most satisfying life that could possibly be experienced by anyone. As Jesus himself said, "I am come that they might have life, and might

have it more abundantly," {cf, John 10:10b KJV}.

- The caricature says that the facts upon which Christian faith rests, i.e., the death and the resurrection of our Lord, are mere stories, legends that gathered around the figure of Christ in the early church, which Christians must accept by blind faith without any confirmation or support. But the real article says these are actions of God in history that can be tested by the normal means of testing evidence and that they form, therefore, a solid ground of faith based on history.
- The caricature says that the goal of the Christian faith is to produce a heaven filled with rather starchy, stiff, hymn-singing saints. But the real thing says the goal of Christian faith is to produce love-filled homes right now, filled with strong, manly men, and gracious, sweet-tempered women, and orderly, alert, admirable children, who live together facing the normal, usual problems of life with thoughtfulness and mutual dependence upon the activity of a living God in their midst.

Now that is real Christianity!

In this introductory section of the Apostle John's first letter we have been noting what he has to say about maintaining fellowship with the Son of God. That is the secret of the abundant life. In Chapter 2 he comes to the practical goal toward which all this is moving. You will find this in Verses 7-11. But may I point out that all of this section is a commentary on one phrase in Verse 5 of Chapter 2. John says there, "but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is being perfected," i.e., it is finding its completeness, it is being fulfilled in him who keeps God's word.

Now, in Verses 7-11, he takes that phrase, “the love of God is being perfected,” and explains it, indicating that it is the supreme goal of the Christian life. I hope you catch the importance and urgency of his word. What the apostle is saying is that the goal of the Christian life is to cause us to love as God loves. The one single, most desperate need of humanity is for love. Yet, the twisted paradox of our lives in this 20th century is that we increasingly find it impossibly hard to give what another one desperately needs. Therefore, because others have the same trouble, we find ourselves unable to have what we cannot live without – love. There you have the whole pathetic tragedy of human life today. A hunger for love, on the one part, and an inability to satisfy it on the other. That is the dilemma of human life.

Just this last week I received a packet in my mail, a large manila envelope. I opened it, not knowing what was inside, and found it was a letter. The reason it came in such a large envelope was because it was 25 single-spaced typewritten pages. It was a letter from a lonely man who, writing in the loneliness of his hotel room in the loneliness of a big city, was simply putting down his thoughts, reactions, and attitudes, and mailing them to me with the hope that I would read through, and share some of his feelings. I could not help but feel that was typical of our day. The hunger expressed in loneliness is simply a cry for love out of the human heart.

Now, the glorious news of Christianity is that in this strange impossible dilemma in which we live, a tremendous breakthrough has been achieved. A way has been found, through the death and the resurrection of Jesus, and through the process of union and fellowship with him, by which we might fulfill these demands made upon us, and satisfy the needs of our own hearts.

See how John describes this in Verses 7 and 8 of Chapter 2:

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. {1 Jn 2:7-8 RSV}

Do those seem strange words, “an old commandment,” “a new commandment”? What does he mean? What is old and yet new? There is a clue here in his words, “an old commandment which you had from the beginning,” i.e., the beginning of your Christian life, as this phrase most frequently means in John’s letter. This is something that you learned when you first came into the Christian experience. It accompanied or was part of “the word which you heard,” i.e., God’s word to man. What is the first note of God’s word to man? Well, it is written all through the Scriptures. You find it at the beginning of the Bible and it runs like a river all the way through the inspired text, from beginning to end. Jesus called it the first and great commandment, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy strength, and all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,” {Matt 22:36-37, Mark 12:29-30 KJV}.

That was the first commandment to be broken. Adam violated it in the Garden of Eden when he chose to love his wife more than he loved his God, and, following her into temptation and sin, the race fell in him. The second part of it was violated by his son, Cain, whose contemptuous response to God’s inquiry about his brother has become the classic expression of loveless unconcern, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” {Gen 4:9b}. It is the violation of love toward God and toward men.

Now, John is indicating that this old commandment is, in some sense, new. What does he mean, “Yet I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you ...”? If you are familiar with his Gospel, you know this is an echo of our Lord’s own words recorded in the thirteenth chapter of John, in the Upper Room, “A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you,” {cf, John 13:34}. That last phrase, “as I have loved you” is the key. To love one another is an old commandment, as old as the human race. But “as I have loved you” is new. The manner by which we love, the process by which this can occur is new.

Did you ever think how difficult it was for our Lord to love the disciples? As you read the New Testament, how do you think of these men? We are so apt to see them through the aura of twenty centuries of admiration that I’m afraid we glamorize these disciples and see them only as saints, al-

most plaster saints. But these were no plaster saints, these were very human men:

- There was Peter, with his tendency toward boasting, always a bit overbearing, very difficult to get along with at times, and so utterly unreliable, so given to boastful commitments that he could never fulfill and then falling flat on his face when the hour of testing came.
- And there were James and John, those two young men whom our Lord called the “sons of thunder,” {Mark 3:17}. That is a very revealing description. I do not know exactly why he called them that but it evidently reflects something of their disposition, their temperament. We do know that they were somewhat spoiled young men, a bit selfish. It was they who came with their mother and asked Jesus for a place, one at his right hand and one at his left hand, when he came into his kingdom.
- Then there was stubborn, unmovable, doubting Thomas, and mousy, retiring, introspective Philip, and the practical, hardheaded Scotsman, Andrew, and all the others. They were sometimes most disappointing and frequently very disagreeable. There are even occasions when the Lord, almost in exasperation, says, “How much longer must I put up with you?” So if you think these men were easy to love, you are mistaken.
- There is that occasion in Luke 17 when the Lord said to them, “If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in one day, and repents, then seven times you are to forgive him,” {cf, Luke 17:3-4}. If your imagination fills in the details of that, you can see the apostles looking at one another and, thinking of the difficulty they have in even forgiving one another once, as one man they turn to the Lord and say, “Lord, increase our faith!” {Luke 17:5}.
- There was Judas, too, who betrayed him, whom the Lord knew was working against him from the very beginning.

Yet the wonderful truth is, he loved these men, loved every one of them. He was sometimes displeased with them, he was irritated by them, he was exasperated by them, but he loved them. And he said to them, “a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you,” {cf, John 13:34 KJV}.

There, hidden in that last phrase, is the wonderful process that John is now explaining to us. He says this is the new commandment. “I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” How did our Lord love these men the way he did? As Paul says in Romans, “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us,” {cf, Rom 5:5 KJV}. That is also the way the Lord loved his disciples. The love of God was shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Spirit who was given unto him without measure. That is the only way anyone loves another the way God loves. Only God can love that way.

Therefore it is the same way for us. That is why John says, “which is true in him and in you.” It comes out of a shared life. It is the fact that you and he share together the same life that makes it possible for you to love another who may be difficult, disagreeable, or hard to live with. It is because the love of God is shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit who is given unto you. That is the only way it can be done. This, therefore, is the new thing. The old commandment was there from the beginning. We are our brother’s keeper. No man is an island. We have a responsibility to love each other. But we have never found the way until we find it in the sharing of the life of Jesus, the fellowship with the Son of God. In the light of that new power it is now possible to perform the old commandment. Therefore, John says, “the darkness is passing away.”

Do you find that true in your life?

He does not say the darkness is past, because obviously there are still times of weakness. There are times when we become angry, and even hateful toward one another, as Christians. But the darkness of hatred and indifference is rapidly passing away as the light of the nature of our Lord, the light of the character of God, is possessing us, gripping us, as we grow in grace and fellowship

with him. This is the secret of love and there is no other.

Now comes the question, “How do you measure your progress in this?” How do you know how far along you have come, or whether you have even begun?

John answers that in Verses 9 and 10. You can test yourself by asking, “What is my attitude toward my fellow Christian, my brother in Christ, the man who, like me, professes faith in Jesus Christ?”

He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. {1 Jn 2:9-10 RSV}

What does he mean here by hate? – “He who hates his brother.” The dictionary tells us that hate is “a feeling of extreme hostility or extreme dislike of another.” That suffices as far as the definition is concerned. We know well the feeling, this dislike, this aversion to someone, a sense of extreme hostility toward another. Ah, yes, but it can be expressed in two different ways. It can be active, in that we indulge in malicious talk or injurious actions toward another. We can strike them, or beat them, or throw our garbage over their fence, or mistreat them in some way. We can attack them, we can slander them behind their back. All these are active expressions of hate, and perhaps most of us think of hate only in this sense. But hate can also be expressed passively and still be hate. It can be expressed by indifference, by coldness, by isolation, by exclusion, unconcern for another. Someone has well said that indifference is the cruelest form of hate. You only need to read the Gospel records to see how true that is. What hurt our Lord most was not the active enmity of those who were trying to accomplish his death, but the coldness and indifference of those who once followed him yet turned aside from him and idly stood by as he was put to death.

Now John says that he who hates his brother is not a Christian. He is “in the darkness until now,” i.e., he has never come out of it. He is in the state of darkness in which the whole race is plunged and into which we were all born. He has never been removed from that. To say you are in the light and yet hate your brother is a basic denial of faith. We have seen this all along.

Notice also Verse 11:

But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. {1 Jn 2:11 RSV}

Such an attitude of hostility, indifference or unconcern toward an other is a mark of an unregenerate life. But notice that the apostle is careful to make a distinction between walking in the darkness, and being in the darkness. To be “in the darkness” is to be unregenerated, as you see also from Chapter 3, Verse 14:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death. {1 Jn 3:14 RSV}

Darkness and death are the same thing. He who hates has never been born again, has never passed into life.

To return to Verse 11, Chapter 2, he says “He who hates his brother is in the darkness,” i.e., unregenerated, and he walks in the darkness, i.e., he experiences the effect of this in his daily life as he goes along. He describes what that is. It is not to know where you are going, i.e., not be aware of what hate is leading to.

Our papers today are filled with crimes of violence, unusual incidences of appalling, senseless violence. People are asking, where is all this coming from? Why is it that this kind of thing is breaking out all over the country? Where is this violence coming from? Remember the word of our Lord in Matthew 24? “When wickedness abounds, the love of many shall grow cold,” {cf, Matt 24:12}. There is an inevitable consequence here. When the moral life of a nation degenerates to the place where immorality and wickedness abound, then there is a hardening, a stultifying of the life of that nation. The love that is intended to be like a fire in the heart of man grows cold and unresponsive and, as a result, there come outbreaks of senseless violence and injury.

The Apostle John is tracing the same thing here. He says that he who hates his brother is in the darkness and has no idea where it will lead to. He does not know where he is going. He has no

understanding that this can lead to murder or to mayhem, to heartache and heartbreak. He goes blindly on, stumbling on in his hateful attempt to do evil to his friend, or brother, or companion, whoever it may be. But the result is, he is only damaging himself and all he loves. He has no idea where he is going.

Furthermore, he is blinded, John says, “the darkness has blinded his eyes.” The word that is used here is a word that means “to make insensitive” and it implies that if we live in this way, we ultimately come to the place where we no longer can respond. Hatred grips us and hardens our heart and it is no longer able to be softened by any force that comes upon us. This is the warning that runs all through the Scriptures about the nature of human life. When we give way to feelings of hatred we inevitably harden our own heart.

Now, John says, only the worldling can do this. A Christian may temporarily succumb to this kind of thing (and we see this, otherwise there would not be these pleas in the New Testament for the Christian to put away malice, anger, hatred and all the other things). Yes, he can walk in darkness, temporarily, but he no longer is in the darkness. He is no longer a child of darkness. The light of God’s love has come into his heart. If he is not aware of a struggle between the expression of hate and a sense of concern, and conscious of guilt over his attitude of hate, then he ought to wonder whether he has really passed from death unto life. It is possible for a Christian to walk in darkness, as we find in Chapter 1, Verse 6: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness...” But he is not in the darkness. This is something that the Spirit of God will inevitably deal with in the Christian and break, and it may sometimes be by very difficult measures.

I know some Christians who have had to come almost to the end of their life before they could face up to the power of hatred over them.

I remember an occasion when I was counseling with a woman about a physical problem which really had a spiritual basis in her experience. I discovered she hated another person and had hated her for years. She told me the circumstances, and, undoubtedly, she had been treated unjustly, but the thing had eaten like a canker in her heart for years and years. Hate had turned her bitter and rancid and had poisoned all her thoughts. I said to her, “You must find it in your heart to forgive this per-

son, as God has forgiven you.” She looked at me and said, “I can’t forgive her, I’ll never forgive her!” I said, “But God says you must.” She said, “But I can’t.” I said, “If you can’t, then you need to face the fact that you are not a Christian, because if you can’t forgive, then you’ve never been born again.” She looked at me, and said, “I guess you’re right. I know I am a Christian, and I see I have just been deceiving myself. I need to forgive.” And she did! There came a change in that woman’s life which was like turning from night unto day.

Now, a Christian can forgive. He can, of course, delude himself into going along with the world’s attitude that he cannot forgive, for it is true that the worldling cannot forgive. When the worldling hates he finds himself locked in an unbreakable grip that he cannot get away from. Hatred, bitterness, and resentment will follow him down through the years. But when the Son of God comes into his life, the power of the evil one is broken, and he is delivered from this, and can forgive. But we still must agree to it. God is not going to make us forgive apart from our own will, though the ability to do so is there.

Notice the contrast the apostle draws here in Verse 10. “He who loves his brother abides in the light.” That is, the fact that he loves is proof that he is abiding in the light, he is in fellowship with the Son of God. He is walking in openness and honesty before God, and the proof of it is that he loves all the disagreeable brethren around him. Though he may be irritated by them, or upset by them, he does not cut them off, he does not exclude himself from them, he does not go away and say, “Let them go their way and I’ll go mine.” Or, “I’ll forgive, but I’ll never forget.” Oh, no. He still shows that heart of concern which is born of the Holy Spirit, the love of God which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us.

In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord said we are to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us and spitefully use us, and thus, he said, “you will be the children of your Father in heaven” {cf, Matt 5:45}, i.e., you will demonstrate, you will manifest the fact that you are children of the Father, “who is kind to the ungracious and the selfish.”

Now that is what God’s kind of love is, not the love of the lovely but the love of the unlovely, a concern and manifest willingness to mix with, talk

with, deal with and help those whom naturally you find it difficult to respond to. That is the love of God. “He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it – the light – there is no cause for stumbling.” If we walk in love toward one another there is no problem that cannot be worked out, there is no reason for division or schism among us, there is nothing that can separate us if we walk in the light as he is in the light.

Oh, the hunger of the world for the manifestation of love. And oh, the hunger of God that those yearnings of the world might be satisfied by Christian hearts which reflect the heart of God.

Prayer:

Our Father, this is a word for the day in which we live, in which abounding wickedness has turned many hearts cold. Their love has died, they have become indifferent to one another. What a cry there is today for a resurgence of love, a manifestation anew in the midst of this broken society of a love that loves the unlovely and is willing to help them, pray with them and be concerned over them to meet their need despite the irritating things they do. Lord, we pray that this may be manifest in us, not because we are trying to make it so, but because we have found the One who, if allowed to have his way, will make it so in us. We ask this in Christ’s name, Amen.