

YOUR FATHER WILL REWARD YOU

by Steve Zeisler

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

Eternal life---life so rich that it fills our experience right now and so valuable that it will last forever. That was as important a question as a man or woman could ask, and it was being asked of the right person. The sad thing, of course, is the attitude with which he asked it: to test Jesus.

"'What is written in the Law?' [Jesus] replied. 'How do you read it?'
He answered: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'
'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'" (Luke 10:25-28.)

This man summarized the Law of the Old Testament with two great commands (from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). Jesus pronounced his summary excellent. In fact, when Jesus was asked to summarize God's intentions, he said essentially the same thing.

What would be a godly response to Jesus' conclusion, "Do this and you will live?" I can think of a couple of responses that would be appropriate. One time Peter, confronted with the Savior and his claim, fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). Faced clearly with what God calls us to do and realizing how desperately unable we are to do it, we might say, "Go away from me, Lord; I don't deserve nearness to you!"

Another appropriate response might ask for help. A man whose son had epilepsy finally cried to Jesus in his struggle, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

What the expert in the Law did in fact, though, was something different: "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'Who is my neighbor?'" Faced with a righteous summary of the Law of God, it is foolish to manipulate these profound requirements for self-justification.

In the Sermon on the Mount we are at the end of a series of Jesus' challenges to teachings about the Law that were given as efforts to justify oneself, or to deflect the hard truth of God's Law. There are six paragraphs in which Jesus says, "You have heard that the ancients were told..." some rationalization or misunderstanding of the Law so that they could attempt to keep it themselves, "...but I say to you..." The sixth of these challenges is about loving our neighbor. This is perhaps the highest of these legal issues that Jesus speaks of. Matthew 5:43-48:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons 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. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Widening the circle of love

The Law does not say to love our neighbor and hate our enemy. The Old Testament never proclaims hatred for

our enemies as appropriate. Some of the wisest thinkers of the Old Testament said, rather (Proverbs 25:21),

"If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink."

As we have just seen, the Law also said, "Love your neighbor *as yourself*." The standard is conveniently left off in the teaching that Jesus is correcting; it says merely, "Love your neighbor." Then, it seems, as quickly as you can dispense with that responsibility, dealing with the small circle of people you're required to love, you can get on with the business of hating people who are not like you, which ought to take up a great deal more of your time. This teaching leaves off any thoughtful exposition of what it means to love. So Jesus says, "But I tell you: Do more than love your neighbor. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...."

Paul says in Galatians that one of the functions of the Law is to be a schoolmaster or a tutor to lead us to Christ. How would the statement from Leviticus 19:18, "...Love your neighbor as yourself," serve as a tutor? Think about the good laws, restrictions, or demands that are made in your life in a similar vein. For instance, suppose you decide that you need to diet to lose weight, and you undertake a certain kind of diet. You get a list of foods that are permitted and a list of foods that are forbidden. You dutifully memorize the lists. But every time you go out someplace you look in the dessert column of the menu for desserts that are not on the forbidden list: "Ah, baklava, that was never mentioned on the list of forbidden foods!" Now, that would completely undercut the point of the listing of forbidden foods. The point is to teach you to think differently about food, to learn to see not only the specific forbidden things, but all the kinds of things that would prevent you from losing weight. In the same way, a law, if it is a good and useful one, should expand to more things, not be strictly limited to the tiniest scope that can be permitted. It ought to teach us to think better so that we make good choices instead of bad ones.

I recently had to get a smog certificate for my car. I resented having to get a smog certificate, and I was frustrated because I realized that some repairs were going to be required. My approach to getting the smog certificate was to do everything I could to get the car to pass without having to spend any money actually fixing it to keep it from spewing pollutants into the atmosphere. And I had to repent of my attitude. If the law requiring the smog certificate is a good law, what it ought to do is promote environmental awareness in me: Not only will I fix my car and get the smog certificate, but I will have been awakened to concern for the environment, and I will stop selfishly doing things that pollute and destroy it. The small law regarding a smog certificate should have taught me, were it a good law and I a good man, to extend farther and farther the point it was making.

But what the teachers Jesus is challenging here did was go the exact opposite direction. Their thinking was, "Let's find the smallest scope of this law. When it says, 'love your neighbor,' let's draw that circle as tight as we possibly can so that the people you are actually required to love is minimized. Once you've accomplished that, you are completely free to mistreat, hate, compete with, and reject everyone who is outside the circle!"

The Golden Rule

How would a conviction that you should love your neighbor as you love yourself work itself out rightly in your experience? Think about what you know about yourself for a moment. You know some of the hurts you have experienced. You have some understanding of the fears that have influenced your choices in life. You know that at times you're lazy, defensive, and self-centered; at times you speak before you think; at times you do things that you wish you could take back. The assumption is that your neighbor is just like you. So instead of taking it personally when they react defensively to you and striking back at them, loving your neighbor would start by saying, "Maybe they're doing what I do. They're reacting out of some old anxiety. If I took the time to give them the same credit I give myself, maybe I wouldn't feel hurt. Maybe I could be helpful."

So the business of discovering yourself and applying all the patience, grace, forgiveness, and special treatment that you give yourself to someone else widens the circle of acceptance. And that lesson, if it is well learned, can be extended farther to people who come at life even more differently from you in their habits, attitudes, and so on. Maybe they're like you, too. The scope ever widens finally, to people who are vastly different in culture and attitude...and they really aren't so different after all. Jesus taught us the Golden Rule: I hope to be treated a

certain way, so I should treat other people that way. Maybe using my longings, I can assume the longings of another.

There are so many times when we see estrangement in the world around us. I was speaking this week with an Irish Presbyterian minister. He talked about growing up in northern Ireland as a Protestant, assuming that Catholics were in effect the offspring of the devil, wicked and evil; and that their doctrine was completely devilish and a damning denial of everything that was true in the Bible. His best friend was killed by the IRA, and that just fueled his hatred of these horrible people. How painful and hard it was for him to learn the lessons that truth finally taught him, that other people aren't so different; that if he would assume that they were like him instead of assuming that they were completely different, he would treat them differently. Over time he began to see that Catholic people were really just people. The destructive walls of hatred that have existed for so long in northern Ireland were broken down in his experience.

Some of the frustration we experience is cross-generational: Parents don't understand their kids and they're driven crazy by them. But what if the assumption was that kids today aren't really that different from you when we were kids? What if you started out with the assumption that everything that made your life out of control, desperate, and confused when you were a kid is probably similar to what drives them? If you would love them as you love yourself, can you cross that chasm and look at things from their experience?

Take some of the tension that exists between the sexes. Men and women assume that there is something immensely different about each other; "men are from Mars and women are from Venus," and they never understand each other. But what if I assume that the woman I can't communicate with at work or the neighbor I can't get along with is more like me than not, and I begin to put myself in her shoes, try to see life from her perspective, and imagine what it would be like to be her? What would happen then? If we will learn the lesson, the Law is there to teach us.

Don't be too impressed by ordinary affection

Another thing Jesus highlights here is the nature of love itself. He talks about a standard of love that is completely inadequate. I bought a cookie at Mrs. Fields the other day. And on the little bag that came with it, it said the cookie was "made with love and other natural ingredients." The phrase interested me almost as much as the cookie, because it struck me as being both true and not true at the same time.

There is a sense in which love is not natural: *Agape*, God's sacrificial love, love that is self-denying is supernatural. It comes only from God. But there is a natural form of love, an affection that is true of everybody, believer or not. And Jesus begins to ask those whose teaching he is correcting here, "Are you impressed with yourself for doing something that is really very ordinary?" He is saying, "You love those who will love you back. Is that a big deal? You've agreed on the ground rules already, and nothing difficult or demanding is going to happen. You launch yourself out in love in a risk-free environment. But selfish tax collectors and pagans do that much. If you greet your brothers---those who look like you, whose accent is just like yours, who came from the same place you did---have you knocked yourself out or done something extraordinary?"

We need very much to examine ourselves as an evangelical subculture in this country on this basis, perhaps especially at election time. At times we like to claim that we alone have family values (you have to be a Christian to love your children). We say we're really committed to our kids and we want the best for them; we want them to go to good schools, be successful and have moral character, and we assume that only we think that way about our children. But don't Mormons and Muslims and animists and atheists love their children? Don't families everywhere in every generation do that? Is anyone impressed with the fact that we are willing to sacrifice ourselves somewhat for the sake of our children? Why do we take credit for something that anyone could do, as if God were performing some supernatural act in us? Outsiders are unimpressed and we are too impressed with ordinary affection.

We say we're committed to fellowship with one another. What we often mean by that is people's gathering in small circles, saying predictable things, and never raising any hard issues. If someone fails much, they will be shunned fairly quickly. People who rise to leadership are the most wealthy, the most powerful, or the most

gifted. Little that is new or original or difficult takes place in such fellowship. And of course the outsider looks on and says, "I'm glad you have fellowship. I actually belong to a country club. We treat one another essentially the same there."

We claim to be committed to worship. We want to regularly meet in God's presence---and it's just as entertaining as anything Hollywood can do. Outsiders are unimpressed and we're too impressed with things that anybody can do, lives that anybody can live, which don't require the presence of God at all.

We claim to be those who witness to others of the truth, yet we're proud of the fact that we've never had to say a challenging thing to anyone.

Are we doing anything more than pagans do? Is our commitment to Christian experience in any degree different from the experience of tax collectors, unbelievers, rebels against God, or secular humanists? Is there anything about us that you can't account for except by the presence of Jesus here?

Love as your Father loves

Jesus says the statement, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy" is completely inadequate. His call for those who want to take him seriously is a higher standard. There are much more serious issues at stake than this. "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."

The teacher who wanted to test Jesus finally said, "Who is my neighbor?" hoping to justify himself. The more important question that Jesus raises here is, Who is my Father? He is talking about parents as opposed to peers. (Gender issues are not in view; this is not about father as opposed to mother or son as opposed to daughter.) We are either going to think, act, and react in ways that are imprinted on us by our heavenly Father, or we are going to live our lives according to the way our peers think of us. He says, "Prove yourself to be sons [whether male or female] of your Father. Learn to live the way your Father lives, think as your Father thinks, and love as your Father loves. It's not good enough to measure yourself against those who are peers."

Jesus goes on to say that God is very generous with his enemies. This world is filled with people who actively hate their Creator, who are born rebels against him and love rebellion against him. They blaspheme his name and try to undermine his purposes at every opportunity. They are stiff-necked in their willingness to despise the Lord God, and they laugh at and ridicule those who believe in him. Yet God treats them with complete generosity. His sun (not any old sun, but his own personal sun) is appointed to shine on those who hate him as much as it shines on those who love him. The rain falls generously on those who hate him as much as on those who love him. He withholds his wrath, he extends his love, and he waits patiently for those who hate him and blaspheme his name. There is no one that he cuts off, no one he is unwilling to hear from, no one he is not a heartbeat away from responding to. There is no one that he rejects, no one he laughs at, no one he enjoys seeing suffer. Can we learn to have the heart that God has for people, to see life as he does? Can we have the life of our Father imprinted on our lives?

Leslie and I have managed to raise two young adults at this point. It has been a fascinating process to watch our daughter and son grow up. There is a great deal about them that is dissimilar from either of us. For instance, through much of their teen years their taste in music was one I wouldn't have had for anything. And their history was different. I was talking with some friends about defining moments for a generation. Both of my parents can remember with crystal clarity the moment they heard that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and that the United States would enter World War II. I remember the same way hearing about the death of John F. Kennedy. Neither of our kids has those historical anchors. They have a different world view and history that they grew up with. They're not the same as we are in a lot of ways. But I can look at my daughter's sense of humor, the things she values, and the way she takes on life, and say, "She's just like her mother," not in the incidental things, but in the things that go deepest inside. It's less clear to me about my son because I don't see myself as well, but I've heard people say, and I believe it's true, that he's a lot like me, too.

In the same way, we can allow our heavenly Father to make us like him. We can learn his heart from the inside, have what matters to him imprinted on us, and be transformed by a relationship with him. Or we can

assume that what our peers think, in their putting themselves first and limiting their love to a tiny circle of neighbors, is what we should be shaped by.

Notice that the command here is not that we like our enemies. God doesn't like his enemies in the sense of approving of their behavior or enjoying their wickedness. He doesn't applaud their inflicting pain on others. We don't need to like our enemies. The command here is that we love them and that we pray for them, wish them the best, long for their restoration, and call out to God on their behalf that he would do whatever work it takes to give them eternal life and blessing and holiness.

I don't know who your enemies are. We have made reference to politics. Maybe you have strong political convictions, and you are very concerned about the course of public education, tax and spending issues, illegal immigrants, or health care. And you feel very strongly that anyone who opposes you should be defeated. Or it may be that your enemies are more personal. There may be someone who has destroyed a lot of your life, inflicted a lot of pain on you, abused you, lied about you, or stabbed you in the back when you trusted them. You could name the name in an instant. But it doesn't really matter where we discover people we don't like or how we came to have them in our lives. The question is whether we will become children of our Father and allow the love that he has even for his enemies to inform what we think and to change our prayers so that we long for their betterment.

The greatest encouragement to love

Those of us who are children of God are adopted children. If you have known the Lord for a long time, you may have forgotten that. If you have grown up in a Christian family, it may never have become quite clear. But every one of us entered the human race as a rebel. We are God's children by grace in Christ; we did not show up on our own. Remember what Paul said in Romans 5:8: "...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we now have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" The greatest encouragement to love that I know of is to reflect on our being forgiven for our lovelessness, rebellion, and sin. What we hate about other people was true of us, and yet we are the beneficiaries of God's gracious love and mercy.

One of my favorite accounts from the gospels, which I return to often in my thinking and reading, is the story in Luke 7:36-50 of Simon, the proud Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner and then mistreated him, withholding ordinary courtesies. But sitting at his table, Jesus took over the dinner party and began to expose Simon's sin. In the midst of the dinner a woman came in crying, wetting Jesus' feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, and pouring perfume on them. At the end of it Jesus said, "I see this unbelievable, unshackled, selfless love, and I conclude that she has been forgiven, because love comes from no other place." Then in that profound moment he turned to Simon and said, "The one who is forgiven little loves little."

If we would learn to be sons of our heavenly Father, we must go back and reflect clearly on what it cost Christ to forgive us. We were no bargain for the Lord! We were none who deserved his love. He gave his forgiveness to us freely. It is remembering this that will open the possibility of love in our hearts toward people whom we find obnoxious, cruel, frightening, and difficult. The one who recognizes little need of forgiveness loves little; and the converse is also true—the one who has been forgiven much loves much.

I want to end with a call to do something specific. Sometime this week at least once, will you extend yourself to do something loving for a person you don't expect to love you back? I don't mean somebody you already like or you're already familiar with, nor someone who is going to be perceptive of your sacrifice and at some point come back and do something sacrificial for you. Don't choose someone who is already in the circle of neighbors. Will you greet somebody, at some risk to yourself? Will you reach out and say hello to someone, wish them well and express concern for them who may snub you, turn their back on you, reject you, laugh at you, or stare at you? Will there be anything, even once in the coming week, that will remind the world of love that is different from that which can be generated by human beings.

It could be a second grader in East Palo Alto who needs tutoring, and doesn't have much to give you back. It could be young people of all kinds in your community who are so confused and desperate and in over their

heads that they don't have much to offer you back. It could be someone with a learning disability or physical handicap, someone who is homeless or addicted to drugs, or others who have all kinds of things that make them difficult to be around. But the challenge is to, at least once in the course of the next seven days, try something where you can't predict that any good will come of it to you. See if learning God's heart doesn't make it more sure in your experience that you are in fact a child of your Father!

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