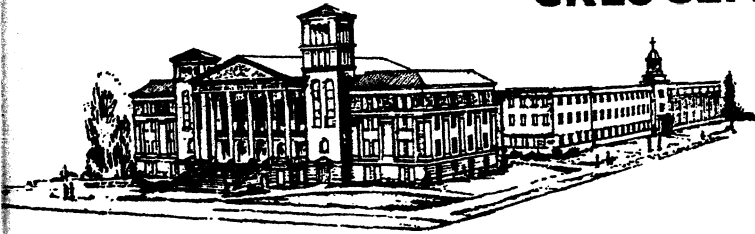


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF"

Sunday Morning, November 27, 1960
John R. Claypool

One of the distinctive marks of the Christian religion has been its emphasis on love. It was this quality in the early Christians that most impressed their contemporaries. Even the critic Celsus, who found so much wrong with "the Way," could not keep from exclaiming: "Behold, how these Christians love one another." This emphasis is deeply rooted in all of the New Testament documents. The epistle of I John makes it the basic criterion of Christianity by saying, "We know we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren (3:14)." Jesus said much the same thing: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one for another (John 13:35)." When asked to give the central commandment for one's human relationships, Jesus answered: "Love thy neighbor as thyself (Matt. 22:39)." Therefore, there is little question as to the centrality of this quality called love.

Yet what does this mean for practical living? More than one serious minded person has asked me this question. This demand appears to be entirely unrealistic in our kind of world where so many people are unlovely and where evil is so real. Does this mean we are to be fond and affectionate to those who are utterly repulsive and distasteful to us? Because this comes up so often, and because it is so basic to Christianity, I think we need to take these familiar words and examine their implications. "Love thy neighbor as thyself," says Jesus. The matter really involves two questions: "What is love?" and "Who is my neighbor?"

First of all, let us examine the meaning of love. Quite frankly, the problem here for English speaking people is a semantic one. We use one word to express many different connotations. Little wonder that people get confused about the meaning of love, for think of the many ways it is used. We use it to describe the relation between parent and child—a father "loves" his sons or a son his father. We use it to describe physical affection—as a man "loves" a woman. We use it to describe the bond between friends—like David "loved" Jonathan. We use it to describe our attitude toward inanimate things—like I "love" that suit or I "love" anything red. We use it to describe allegiance to causes or organizations—I "love" my country, I "love" my club. And then, of course, we use it to describe God's attitude toward us and our attitude toward God. Quite obviously, these are different connotations. The English word "love" stands for many different realities; therefore, we must face this linguistic limitation and distinguish the precise nature of the kind of love we are to have for our neighbor.

Let me make this clear: to love one's neighbor is not primarily to be fond of him or like everything about him or feel about him as you do toward your son or

sweetheart or mother. These emotional feelings are loves of a different type. The key to the kind of love Jesus meant is found in that last phrase: "as thyself." How do we love ourselves? We do not get sentimental and say, "I like myself; I'm fond of the wonderful qualities I possess." Not at all. Quite to the contrary, there are things about ourselves that we very much dislike and wish were different. No, our attitude toward ourselves is not a feeling, but an attitude of positive good will. If we are normal, we desire the best for ourselves. We have a constructive intention in what we do. We seek to realize the fullest potential of our capabilities and circumstances. To will to destroy oneself is abnormal. The usual attitude is to will one's good. And this is exactly how we are to regard our neighbor. It is not so much a matter of feeling as an attitude—I want his best interest served; I want to enable him to realize his full potential; I will that his good shall be accomplished. Frederick Speakman has written a beautiful little book called Love Is Something You Do. In it he asserts over and over that Christian love for one's neighbor is not primarily a feeling or fondness or affection—it is assuming the attitude of positive good will and abstaining from any action that is destructive or harmful to another.

When you stop and consider, this makes perfect sense. Our likes and dislikes are not intrinsically volitional. It is not so much a matter of will as of purely personal response. By temperament I like some things and dislike others; I am attracted in one direction and repelled in the other. There is no virtue or sin in these natural tastes. What I will to do with these feelings is the ethical issue. And so in our relationships. Christ does not command us to like everything about everyone. It is no more a sin to find certain qualities distasteful than it is a virtue to find other qualities appealing. So let me repeat: love for one's neighbor is not a feeling or a fondness or the sentimental affection one holds for family or friends. It is an attitude, a set of mind, a constructive intention that works for the positive well-being of my neighbor. If we could see Christ's commandment in this light, it ceases to be an impossible ideal and becomes a practical guide for Christian living. To love my neighbor is to want for him exactly what I want for myself—the very best.

But let us move on to the second question—who is my neighbor? This attitude of positive good will—to whom should this be directed? How wide is the scope? From the example of Jesus, there can be only one answer—all mankind. His love was universal; no one was excluded; all were included. And He lifts for us the same ideal—that we are to regard all men from the vantage point of positive good will.

Now, this teaching has never been popular in our kind of world. It was this belief more than any other that led Jesus to the Cross. Several years ago I read a sentence that stopped me cold in my tracks. The preceding statement was familiar enough. It said, "Jesus died because of His love for sinners." Then it went on, "This is both theologically and historically true." I began to think—"historically true." Why did they crucify Jesus? What were the sources of antagonism? And then I realized that at the very heart of it was His refusal to limit His love. He came into a tragically fragmented world, one that was divided up into a thousand partisan groups. They moved under the flag of limited love. "Love those we love and hate those we hate," they cried. But He steadfastly refused. He did not recognize the barriers that men had erected, for His love spilled over toward every heart. If you move with Him through the dusty roads of Palestine, you cannot escape the inclusive scope of His concern.

He refused to limit His love to religious people. This aroused the Pharisees intensely. They considered themselves the true sons of Abraham; being holy they came out from among the Gentile dogs and Jewish sinners. They prided themselves

in their separation. And here came Jesus, claiming to be religious, and yet going out of His way to befriend sinners. One day you would see Him talking to tax collectors; the next day eating in the home of a publican. On any occasion He might be seen talking to a thief or a prostitute or a beggar. He even claimed these "scum of the earth" were more important, for "it was the sick who needed a physician," the sinner who needed a Saviour. He did not honor the boundary between "good" people and "bad" people. He included both sinner and saint in His love.

Again, Jesus refused to limit His love to any certain class. The world invariably falls into a pattern of social distinctions; it is not so much what a man is as what he has. But Jesus would have none of it. He did not share the hatred of the poor for the rich; neither did He share the contempt of the rich for the poor. He loved them all. There He is talking to the rich young ruler; there He is with a blind beggar. His love went out to the highly respected Nicodemus; but it also included Mary Magdalene, a woman of the streets. The rich and the poor, the high and the low, the respected and "the trash"—all were recipients of His love.

Then too, Jesus refused to limit His love to any particular race. He was a Jew, and proud of His heritage, but in His interest in others He seemed oblivious to racial differences. The Samaritan woman at the Well of Jacob was shocked that He spoke to her. You see, Jews hated Samaritans almost as much as the Klu Klux Klan hates Negroes. But this difference was unimportant to Christ. The Syro-Phoenecian women, the Greek inquirers, the man from Cyrene—all were the same to our all-loving Lord.

Yes, into a bitterly divided world came Perfect Love. He ignored time-honored boundaries and broke down the barriers men had built. What happened? They killed Him, for the hatred of the world cannot tolerate such inclusiveness. But He arose, as did the Love for which He died. You cannot destroy Truth like that, for it is part of God Himself! You can kill a martyr, but you cannot kill the truth for which He died. Perfect Love arose from the grave.

Now, this inclusive love is no more popular today than it was then. In our day of hatred and suspicion and prejudice, it is just as dangerous to love inclusively as it was in Jesus' time. But Christian duty has never been determined by whether it was easy or popular. If we would take seriously the words and example of our Lord, we must dare to love all men, as He loved them, as we love ourselves. Like it or not, the words are decisive and clear: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if ye have love, one for another."

Which brings us back to our original questions about loving our neighbor. What is love? Not fondness or feeling, but an attitude of positive good will and constructive intention. Who is my neighbor? All mankind. And in our day of explosive tension, this, my friend, is not only practical, it is the only way out.