
The Ultimate Command

“The end of the commandment is love . . .” (1 Timothy 1:5)

The cynic has said: “One thing we learn from history is that people do not learn from history.” If this be true the following reference to Martin Luther will be meaningless to you. There is an outside chance, however, that God will intervene. He has promised to grant wisdom to those who ask for it in faith and to open the door for those who keep on knocking.

The point of the story is that honest and intellectual men can sometimes read the Bible and miss its obvious meaning.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Lower Saxony, on November 10, 1483. He was a brilliant individual and was privileged to have access, not only to the Bible, but also to the comments on the Bible by the leading theologians of his day. It is a fact, however, beyond any reasonable doubt or dispute, that for an extended period of time he never understood the Biblical doctrine of “justification by faith.” He may have read about it in the Scriptures, or in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, but he most certainly did not believe it or understand it in his heart.

It is an amazing and almost incredible fact that intelligent men can read the Bible and miss something as basic as "justification by faith." But it happened! And the regrettable process is somehow repeated by every generation. The words of Scripture were always there, but their meaning was obscured by the gloomy shadows of traditional thought. When Luther finally rose above the traditions of his day he was used of God to share his insights with the Christian world and a dramatic "reformation" began to take place.

The World Today

At the present time there are more pagan people alive than there were when Jesus Christ gave the Great Commission. If the present trends continue, our accelerating world population will reach eight billion by the year 2010 and hardly any of those people will be Christian. At the present time for every thirty-five people born in the world only one will come to be associated with Christianity. The religious world is a veritable hotbed of controversy and confusion and new denominations continue to be formed. Instead of solving problems, we seem to be compounding them. Is it remotely possible that people as brilliant and capable as we are could have missed anything?

This book is one meager attempt to prove that we have. In our zealous attempts to please God we have made Christianity into something tedious and technical. Jesus never intended it to be that way. He taught: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:35)

This concept is so utterly simple and basic that it is within the grasp of every human being regardless of intellect or education. It is not just "a" commandment, it is more properly "the" commandment. It is the one unique characteristic of the Christian, but for all intents and purposes it has been lost in a maze of controversy and confusion. The Scriptures explicitly affirm that love is greater than faith and hope and Jesus described it as the basic concept upon which all of God's requirements could be suspended.

A Few Words from the Author of the Bible

Do you remember what Jesus said when He was asked about the greatest commandment in the Bible? He responded:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-38)

Surely these words from the Author of the Bible ought to have a real impact upon our thinking . . . but don't count on it! The subtle and unscrupulous enemy of our souls has the amazing ability to blind our eyes and stop our ears so that "seeing we see not" and "hearing we hear not."

Do not ever forget that Jesus was crucified by Bible students. They read the Bible, committed it to memory, wrote it on the doorposts of their homes, and stuffed it into their broadened phylacteries. They faithfully counted every word and every letter and diligently preserved each "jot and tittle," but they missed the most basic concept of all . . . love!

The same ridiculous mistake has been repeated in every generation and ours is no exception. This is the message that God has been trying to communicate since the beginning of the world, that we should love one another and not be like Cain. The fact that we have memorized those words does not necessarily imply that we have understood them in our hearts or implemented them in our lives.

The Name of the Game

Many years ago a Junior High School boy challenged me to a game of chess. We were at Christian Service Camp and a number of spectators gathered around to observe the contest. Though I was a novice at the game, I did at least understand how each piece was supposed to move. About four moves later he looked up and grinned, "checkmate!" I was thunderstruck! I hadn't lost a man! My pawns were still neatly arranged and my more powerful men were poised for action . . . but I had lost the game. His queen was slanted across the board through a single hole in my defense and my king was hopelessly trapped. "That's called 'fools checkmate' he beamed," and I withdrew from the confrontation to lick my wounds and recapitulate.

The name of the game was "checkmate." I had become so engrossed in the trivia that I had neglected the most important

thing of all. I could have conceivably given up almost any other man on the board and still had a chance, but when the king is gone all else is insignificant.

In Christianity, the name of the game is "love." It is the ultimate command upon which all others are suspended. The Devil can allow us the privilege of any Bible doctrine but love and still have a chance to win. But when we love as Jesus commanded, he knows that all men will be able to acknowledge our relationship with deity. When we are united as Jesus prayed, he knows that all men will come to believe. Love is the name of the game and the unscrupulous enemy of truth is in an all out campaign to keep it buried in that musty stack called "undiscovered truths of the Holy Bible."

The Example of Ephesus

"... after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and love unto all the saints, cease not to give thanks for you . . ." (Ephesians 1:15-16)

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love . . ." (Revelation 2:4)

From here unto the end of the lesson we will be reflecting upon the church at Ephesus. Perhaps a review of their problems will give us insight into our own.

First of all let's go back to the basics. Remember that the essence of Christianity is love. By this, all men are to know that we belong to Jesus. It is the springboard to launch us into evangelism so that the world will believe. Since we were incapable of achieving this love upon our own, He determined to transplant His Holy Spirit into our hearts to enable us to display that love through Him. Remember, the fruit of the Spirit is love!

Everywhere this love exists there is evangelism.

This love existed in Jerusalem, and there was evangelism in Jerusalem. The unity of believers in Jerusalem and their generosity to one another was like a city which was set upon a hill and could not be hid. There is undoubtedly some association between this fact and the observation of the high priest that Jerusalem was filled with the doctrine of Jesus. (Acts 5:28)

There was also love among the saints in Ephesus . . . and there was also a tremendous evangelistic outreach there. As a matter of fact, while Paul was there everyone in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:10)

I used to believe that the generosity of the Jerusalem Christians was a unique phenomenon which was never seen again. Now I am rather inclined to believe that it was the norm rather than the exception. Christianity is so absolutely revolutionary that when a person gets his spiritual temperature up where it ought to be everyone thinks he's got a fever. Please don't wander off on some diatribe either for or against communism, for the early Christians did not practice communism. What they did do was love their neighbors as they wanted to be loved. The golden rule is of universal application. Those whom we love as we do ourselves we will want to see in heaven — therefore we must tell them about Jesus. Those whom we love as we do ourselves we will desire to see clothed and physically comfortable — therefore we will share with them of our earthly means. The essence of the gospel is just that simple.

A Warning to the Ephesian Elders

The simplicity of the gospel was about to be corrupted at Ephesus and Paul issued this warning to the Ephesian elders:

“For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them . . .” (Acts 20:29-30)

No matter what happened the elders at Ephesus were not to lose sight of the essential need to love one another. Consider Paul's concluding remarks:

“I have coveted no man's silver or gold, or apparel. Yea, ye yourselves know that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. *I have showed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, it is more blessed to give than to receive . . .*” (Acts 20:33-35)

The book of Revelation reveals that the church at Ephesus lost its love. The letters of Paul to Timothy help us to understand how and why.

A Review of I Timothy

This letter in the Bible deals directly with the church at Ephesus. Timothy was left there to charge certain men not to teach any other doctrine. (I Timothy 1:3) The nature of this “other doctrine” is revealed throughout the letter itself.

Please do not be offended as I state my opinions about this "other doctrine." I recognize that my views are only an opinion, but I respectfully beg your indulgence.

The essence of the gospel is love. I am convinced that certain men lost sight of that goal and became obsessed with argumentation and debate over various other points of Christian doctrine. I have a growing conviction that this is identically the problem which we face in Christendom today.

Please note that in his introductory remarks, Paul reminds Timothy that "THE END OF THE COMMANDMENT IS LOVE OUT OF A PURE HEART AND FAITH UNFEIGNED . . ." His very next words charge that some had "SWERVED ASIDE" from love unto "VAIN Jangling." (I Timothy 1:5-6)

The "end" or "goal" of all God's commandments is love. The commandments are not an end in themselves, they are a means to an end, and the ultimate end or goal of all God's commandments is love. When you command your child to stand in the corner because he had a fight, standing in the corner is not your ultimate desire for his life. It is only a means to help him understand the importance of loving his brother. When God commanded animal sacrifices, His ultimate aim was to teach us love. If men came to the altar and still had bad feelings toward their brothers, they had missed the intent of God. (Matthew 5:23-24; 9:13; 12:7; Hos. 6:6)

Those who are obsessed with only the technical aspects of Bible study will have little or no time to feed the hungry or clothe the naked. Their bag is jangling over a genealogy, doting about questions, or striving about words to no profit. Such an approach results in utter blasphemy to the doctrine of compassion and concern personified in Jesus.

How vividly I recall an instance many years ago when a former classmate was asked to lead in prayer at a religious meeting. The folk belonged to an opposing denomination and he felt constrained to offer a "three point prayer." He naturally believed them to be wrong and felt a strong compulsion to straighten them out in the only way he had opportunity . . . by his prayer. I was proud of him then, but ashamed of him now. This is identically the mentality of the troublemakers at Ephesus and is specifically forbidden in I Timothy 2:8.

My limited vocabulary is not adequate to describe properly the importance of brotherly love to the church of Jesus Christ. Please read again the letters to Timothy with this in mind.

One of the worst things that can happen to a church is to be embroiled in controversy. The church at Ephesus was, and Timothy was to stop it. The unity and harmony of believers is more important than the rights of husbands or wives, parents or children, masters or slaves. Unity is the very theme of the Ephesian letter and it is also inseparably woven into the fabric of Paul's letters to Timothy. It is not only directly associated with the ultimate aim of the Christian life, but is an essential ingredient to world evangelism. The Christian epistles are not filled with appeals to evangelism, but they are filled with repeated admonitions to love and unity. You cannot have the one without the other.

Remember! The goal of God for our lives is love out of a pure heart. It is the ultimate aim of all God's commandments. You may speak with the tongues of men and angels, you may have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, you may have all faith so that you can move mountains, but if you have no love you are nothing. (I Corinthians 13:1-3).

"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:35)

Questions for Discussion — Lesson One

1. What prevented people in the dark ages from accepting justification by faith?
2. Is love really the ultimate command or can you think of something more basic?
3. Is love the major point of emphasis which an outsider would see in your church?
4. What caused the church at Ephesus to lose its first love?
5. Is evangelism more important than benevolence?
6. Do the Scriptures teach that all argumentation is wrong?
7. Do you feel that the Christian world has given love a proper emphasis?
8. What steps can we take now to help future generations of believers to love one another?
9. If you were the devil, how would you keep Christians from loving one another?
10. Can someone speak in tongues and not have love?