

Things Jesus Never Said  
(2) Thou Shalt Like Thy Neighbor  
I John 4:7

Some years ago, I began a sermon with the words: Jesus never said, "Thou shalt like thy neighbor." After church, one of our more honest men came up and said, "Whew! That's a relief!" True! We all know persons we just cannot like – try as we may – and it is a relief to know that as Christians we do not have to pretend to show a fondness we do not feel. The Lord did not tell us to be everyone's chum. After all, you patently can not find a puppy-dog pleasure in every scrap of humanity that drifts your way. Calling everyone "dah-ling" like Tallulah Bankhead may not be genuine affection – just affectation!

So..., lollipop Christians, who go around trying to like everybody and think that is "caring" not only look ridiculous, but are an affront to the faith – for when Jesus Christ said, "Love your neighbor" – even those who are your "enemies" – he did not mean, "make a boon companion out of everyone, including rogues and rascals," not to mention every tedious bore and crotchety colleague and odd-ball relative you have. You cannot anyway, not without rank hypocrisy, or simpering idiocy.

Some of you remember an early lecture of mine about St. Francis of Assisi, "The Beggar and the Donkey." St. Francis got off that little donkey, threw his arms around his neck, kissed him, and said, "My brother, I love you." You snickered, for you knew kissing donkeys was too much, even for St. Francis! It was not until after the service that someone enlightened me as to what I'd said wrong – that I had the saint hugging the 4-legged beast! Well, at any rate, "love (care for) your neighbor" doesn't mean to go around sentimentally hugging everybody – even the donkeys. No! Hug only those you want to, and only if they'll let you.

Jesus himself did not go around "smiling on militant ignorance" or "sweetly tolerating high-handed tyranny" or "let the world make a doormat out of you." He did not politely bow to, or accept with docility or swallow with a grin every affront to decency and right. No-sir-ree – he got himself crucified by not liking a lot.

For example, when Jesus chased those cheating, lying money-changers out of the temple, did he smile a silly parson's smile and say, "Bless you, my children, bless you, I know you mean well"? Or did he do as I would have done and say, "Excuse me, gentlemen, but may I make a



positive suggestion?” Or did he use the non-directive counseling technique and say, “Well, well, so you are money-changing in the temple, uh huh, I see”? Well...well...

No, he did not, he did not like what was going on – he did not like what they were doing, and the situation called for a knotted whip and a yell to get that thieving hell they were engaged in out of there. They were defiling the temple of God, and needed discipline.

But...was chasing those thieves out of the temple any way to “love (care for) your neighbor”?

Or did our Lord fail to practice what he preached?

Not a bit of it! Certainly, he did not like those crooks, but he did “love” (care for) them, enemies of God though they were – he loved them in the New Covenant sense of that strong, no-nonsense New Testament word for “love” – agape. That is to say, he cared enough to risk his neck to rebuke and discipline them. Indeed, this sort of love finally cost him his life – didn’t it?

Good parents understand this. Good parents, who love their children, know when concern calls for discipline – even at their own peril – that the child will misunderstand.

(I heard it said, not too facetiously, the other day that parents who loved their children, used to carry a switch to punish them, but now they carry it to protect themselves!)

Be that as it may, every time the New Testament commands us to love others -- our family, our neighbors, even our enemies – it uses this sturdy, sensible, sacrificial word, agape – a love directed toward helping, not necessarily enjoying its object.

On the other hand, the word philia – the affection that ought indeed to exist among family and friends – with the warmth of endearment that implies – this love which desires primarily to enjoy its object – this word for love is never used in command in the New Testament. For, God knows we cannot enjoy everyone’s company, and that there are some persons’ company we should not enjoy.

So, Christ leaves us free to choose our own companions, among people we do like to be with, as long as they are of good character. The only line God would have us draw in choosing our close friends is the moral line – the other lines we may draw as we please.

For example, no one, not even God, can make a man like sour pickles or enjoy prunes. That is a matter of individual taste. In like manner, no one, not even God, can force us to like, to enjoy the company of certain types of people. I imagine that to some of us here, associating too long with, say, college professors or church parsons or club ladies would be rather like trying to



take sour pickles or enjoy prunes! Yet some delight in them. In the same way, some prefer old friends and some new. Some would rather sit with the witty while others prefer the silent and dull. Some would choose to eat with country-clubbers and others with day laborers. Some like their associates colorful; some like them colorless. Some like them fat; others thin. And so on and on and on.

The point is, it is a matter of taste, not morality, as to whom one chooses for one's good companions. And frankly, I'm glad God leaves my friends up to me, as long as they are decent folk. But – now get this – though he doesn't tell me whom to like, he does command my concerns, even if he lets me alone about my companions. He does not tell me whom to like, but he does tell me whom to love – whom to have “a concern in my heart for”, as the Quakers say – namely: anyone who needs me.

He tells me to love my neighbors, even if they be professors, Presbyterian parsons or other perplexing types. He tells me to love even my enemy neighbors – including those pesky neighbors I do not like, even those who do not like me, and may not ever. All these – old and young, smart and stupid, good and mean, fat and skinny, black and blue – all of these – I must love, whether I like them or not. And here the word is still agape – that is, I must desire the highest good for – that is, I must have at heart the best interests of – and serve to the end of my ability – both those types I do have a liking for, as well as those I distinctly do not. This is one of heaven's toughest prerequisites – “I know you know” –

For this sort of love is not always easy. As a matter of fact, it is often easier to like people, than to love (care for) them – in this sense.

For example, we may enjoy old Jim's companionship – oh yeah! – we like Jimmy as a bridge partner – yes sir! – and we are pleased to work with James at the office or the Church – you bet – but if Jim ever really needed us, we would vanish – evaporate – become invisible – fail to lend him a helping hand. Indeed, when he's sick, we neglect him; when he's dead, we forget him. So we like good ole Jim boy – in the sense of philia – “nice fellow” – but we do not love him in the sense of agape. Sure, we think he's great, but we wouldn't do him any good. Especially if it cost us Scots Presbyterians anything.

Or again – some parents actually like their children – have great affection (storge) for them – but can hardly be said to love their children in the Christian sense of agape because they try to dominate their offspring's life completely, make family slaves of them forever – and so on.



And the same can be said of certain adult children – who can gush with affection for “dear, dear mama” – and then let mama die in some welfare home because they are too selfish or stingy or ashamed of the old lady to bring her into their fine homes.

So, it is possible to like, have affection – philia or storge -- for those we do not love, in the sense of agape – and this, for the Christian, is a sin.

Or again, some teen-age types -- not all, but some -- are particularly culpable here – these are more capable of easy-going affection – than real appreciation. They like mom and dad alright – “nice folks, O.K.” – but they take the “old man” for granted, treat “Mom” like a social leper, never include them in conversation, seldom ever say “thanks” for homes, clothes, food, car, cash, not to mention education and the encouragement and appreciation they receive.

We could go on and on – there is the tyranny of the wheelchair and the tyranny of the highchair.

Tell me – what’s the point of the parable of the Good Samaritan? I’ll tell you: Let’s say here is a person in need, not of our nationality, not of our class, not of our temperament – we don’t look alike, act alike, talk alike, or see things alike. So there is small chance we shall ever like one another – be friends – and yet, to Jesus Christ, that makes no whit of difference. If that person needs us, no matter who he is, we owe him – active, self-sacrificial concern. We 20<sup>th</sup> century Samaritans owe him our time, our ability, our money, our risk of ridicule – in short, caring and kindness.

And why? Why are we in this stranger’s debt – a person we have never properly met and probably wouldn’t like if we did?

Why do we owe him any Christian care? Any concern? Any sacrifice? Because, because, because – we ourselves are dearly in debt to God in Christ – who died for us whom he couldn’t possibly have liked – but whom he loved – even while we were yet sinners – dying for us.

So that our only way to pay back the debt is to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the sick, be God-like Samaritans ourselves – serving in love – agape – even those we do not like – because these hungry and sick turn out to be – miracle of miracles – none other than Christ Himself. At least, that is what he said, and we believe him, don’t we? Do we?

And, you know, sometimes when we love in real service those we do not like – sometimes – a strange thing happens – we learn to like them after all. We discover we disliked a



person because we did not know him – his fears, his hurts, his tragedy, his hopes and dreams. So that when we do know him well, we not only love him in helping him, but like him too – developing for him an affection we never would have thought possible.

So, it's true, Christ never said, "Like your neighbor" – he did not have to – for he knew that when you serve another in love, that's the best possible way to learn to like him.

So, as the Good Book says, "Let us love one another: for love is of God."

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