

The Pulpit

A SERMON BY THE REV. IRA W. HENDERSON

Subject: Representing Christ.

Brooklyn, N. Y.—Preaching at the Irving Square Presbyterian Church on the theme, "Representing Christ," the pastor, the Rev. Ira Wemmell Henderson, took as his text John 13: 34-35, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another." He said:

This, to my mind, is one of the broadest, most far-reaching, most widely inclusive of the moral duties that our Lord has made obligatory upon those who wish to enter into the Christian life.

The time and the scene are familiar to us all. The Supper is over; Christ has washed the feet of His disciples; the betrayer is named and departed upon his errand of shame. The end is very near. A few hours and Calvary.

With the knowledge of His approaching suffering weighing heavily on His heart, the Saviour with a more than kingly courage speaks His words of comfort and command. Only eleven men, and they soon sorely to be tried, hear the melody of His voice; but to our hearts He speaks to-day, with those same kindly yet authoritatively tones which He swept the faithful, fickle, strangely human souls of that little band to whose ministry we owe so much.

This "new commandment" that our Master enjoins upon the disciples demands equal obedience from us. In it is embodied the essence of the whole moral law. To be true sons of the Father we must exemplify in our own lives those very qualities of love and of loveliness that are the secret of the Saviour to draw men, everywhere and at all times, unto Himself. With our every thought and word and act must we represent the Christ. With all our moral and spiritual forces, given to us of God and dedicated to His service, must we represent the message of salvation.

Let us look for a moment at the character of the love which Christ demands of us who would serve Him truest. With Him there is no letting down either in degree or in kind. Christ asks of us the same ideal love that He spread wide about Him whithersoever He went. "Even as I have loved you," so shall ye love one another. "Not a simple comparison, but a conformity; the love is to be of the same nature," the commentators tell us. Thus we see, that, in short, we are, in our love, to be Christlike. No mere sentimentality, no passing fancy or passion, is this love of which the Christ is typical. It transcends and includes all our personal passions. All the heart's emotions are at their best when, the love of Christ reigning within us, they are expressions of that altruistic, world-including affection which the Nazarene calls forth. The influence of the Christ makes for greater beauty in all the gardens of the soul. Everywhere in life we find it to be so. The gentle light that glances from the mother's eye becomes a holy, steadfast glow when once the power of the loving, living Christ is felt within the soul. All love that is worthy of the name is beautified, ennobled, sanctified by the incomparable of the Spirit of Almighty God, the Comforter from Christ. The Christ life without the Christ love cannot be. The life implies the love. The incoming Christ compels an outgoing love; and only in the measure that we pour out our love upon our fellow men do we live truest for Christ and closest to His side. Thus, we see that, in essence and in sum, our love as Christian men and women must measure true to the character of the love which was in Jesus Christ Himself.

A cursory examination of these words of the Master would lead the reader, perhaps, to conclude that this love that the Saviour showered upon His disciples and to which He bade the eleven to conform was to be confined in its application to themselves only, or at best to those who would accept the Gospel and its messenger. To be sure, there is a mighty element of truth contained even in this limited, short-sighted, rather self-centred view. Christ did mean and does mean that Christians should practice all the arts of love within the circle of those who have heard the call and have answered it. Perhaps it would be better, no not perhaps, but certainly it would be best, for the Christian household of faith, individually and collectively, to make effective in their lives the highest principles of ideal love laid down by Christ. But as we read closer and enter more fully into the mind of the Master we see a deeper and a grander message in these parting commands. Listen once again to His words: "Even as I have loved you." Do you not see the great, world-wide principle lying just within the shadow of the sentence? "Even as I have loved you." And how had He loved them? Moses, you know, brought the children of Israel up from the torrid lands of bondage, up to the confines of the land of Jehovah's promise. And the name of Moses is held in reverent memory by the host of that scattered people of God everywhere to-day. But this Christ, this despised Nazarene, had found these men struggling not only with unwholesome economic and ecclesiastical conditions, but with inner and spiritual distress. True to the purpose and motive of His life Christ had given them the way unto spiritual salvation and, with it, the means to the cleansing of the entire civil life of the world. He had come down from the Father's house beyond the immeasurable blue and, taking upon Himself the burdens and the sins of human kind, had started these men out upon the sure highway that leads to spiritual perfection and all temporal joy. He had found them in deep darkness and had shown them the light. There was no question in Christ's mind as to the depth of their philosophy, or as to the bulk of their purposes, or as to the fit of their

clothes. He did not inquire, so far as we have record, into their ancestry, so to be sure that they were worthy to be in the social set of one who was of the line of David. Ah, no! Christ took them, one and all, at their face value—as men and sinners. He saw in them only men waiting and longing for the touch of a loving hand and the comfort of a sure salvation. He called them and they left their work, their families and their friends, and they followed where He led. And, as they followed, He taught them, and He showed them how, by the power that He alone could give, they might work social and spiritual miracles and transformations in their own lives and also in the lives of their men and of nations. And, withal, He loved them with that mighty, godly love where-with none other had ever loved them before. Such was the love of Christ to His disciples. Such was the character of the affection, in the broadest interpretation, that He lavished upon them. Such was the love which, in its fullest application, He wished them to manifest to all men. He had loved them as sinners. They must love other men in sin. He had dealt kindly and patiently and with all forbearance with them. They must do the same with their fellows. To be sure, they were to strive for harmony among themselves at all times and that they might be known and read of all men as His disciples. Only thus could their teachings gain or retain a merited respect. But the wider expression of the love of Christ that was spread abroad in their hearts demanded, as it demands today, that they look upon all men in sin, as well as upon all Christians, as brothers—and love them.

But, I hear some one ask, suppose Christian men to-day do love, specifically and generically, as Christ commanded that the disciples should love, what then?

That is just the point that I wish to consider. This command of Christ, in its application both to the relation of the Christian to the other faithful and to the world of men in sin about him, is just as imperative upon us as it was upon any of the eleven. And the outworking of that Christ principle in all the departments of human activity will ensure the final solution of all difficulties that now perplex and distress us and the consummation of the Kingdom of our Lord. It is so perfectly easy and so very simple that the ease and simplicity of it all astonishes us. We have become so accustomed to think of our problems as exceptionally hard to solve. We seem to take much joy to assure ourselves of the almost insurmountable difficulty to set the world right with the eternal plan of God. We would much rather, so it would seem, that the whole matter remain complex. We think, perhaps, that God will be easy or us if we fall in a difficult task.

Beloved, it is difficult, it is well-nigh, ye actually, insurmountable, this sin in the world, when squared to the possibilities of our own unaided powers. But did we open our hearts wide toward Heaven once, and let the power of the Spirit of the living Father fill us to the full, did we but empty out our Spirit-filled hearts in love upon our fellow men; did we but put into action once this simple plan of God toward the rehabilitation of the world, we would learn, and that quickly, what are the possibilities of the power that cometh from on high. And the only way to rectify the results of the spiritual, moral, economic and political sins of this world, individual and social, is to let the love of God fill you and through you the world of men about you. This done, the task is light, for our basis of action is changed. We no longer rely upon the wisdom of the philosophies of men and their theories, but we clutch tightly to the power arm of that Ruler of us all to whom all things are possible—and we seize the first thing first.

Now this command of Christ to love one another even as He has loved us, is imperative. It is mandatory and not permissive. If we would be good Christians of full and regular standing in the household of faith we must obey. It is not for us to decide whether or no in our case the law shall be valid. Christ commands, and only by obedience to His demand do we so live that all men shall know that we are His disciples. The test of fidelity is in obedience. Lip testimony is judged by fealty in service. Some one has said: "What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say." It is this central fact that Christ recognizes when He commands a loving ordering of our outward life. We are Christians, but do we live the life of love?

These words of Christ should come home to each of us with more than usual force at this season of the year. Christmas is over; shortly we shall be face to face with those sadder days which are so full of memories of Him who, for our sakes, suffered even ignoble death. It is fitting that we should re-dedicate ourselves to the work that He so dearly loved. In His own good Providence God has seen proper to make use of us to redeem the world. It remains for us to decide to co-operate with Him and to do good work for the kingdom. Shall we put our shoulders to the wheel or shall we add weight to the load? Shall we not drink deep at the fountain of God's love; shall we not be messengers of His healing love unto this weary, sin-crushed world?

Only as we breathe the Spirit of His love do we represent Him.

Let us open then our hearts both God-ward and man-ward; and fill the world with Christ's uplifting, sanctifying love.

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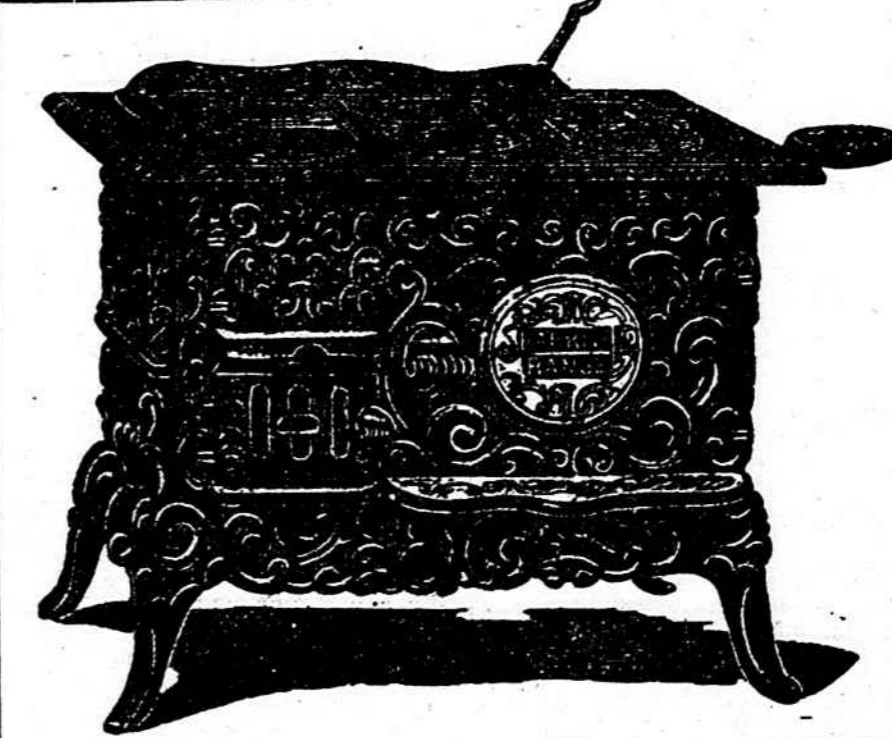
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