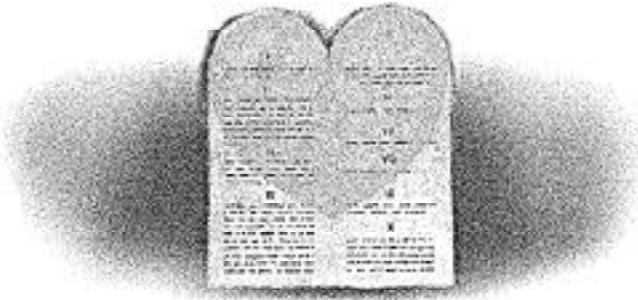


For the Love of God



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him” (Colossians 2:6).

BRITISH WRITER WILLIAM SOMERSET MAUGHAM once said that “the greatest tragedy of life is not that men perish, but that they cease to love.” Maybe. Or perhaps the greatest tragedy is that they have never loved to begin with.

When one looks around the world, the fruits of so-called *love* can be bitter indeed. Many things done for *love* could make people question whether love is nothing but a curse, an irrational spasm of emotion. Think of the marriages that have been dissolved, the homes destroyed, the hearts broken and abused by *love*. Such examples, repeated throughout history, could give the word a bad reputation.

Yet, love is a fundamental element of creation. In one sense, from the inside of atoms to the coldest folds of curved space, love is what holds God’s universe together. If God is love, then we can be sure that love is something good, no matter how poorly it is at times manifested among us. Yet, we need to know what love is, because, as a result of the forgiveness we have received from the Cross, we are told, even commanded, to love—both God and humanity.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: Why should we love God and humankind? What has God done that should cause us to love? Did our love for God lead Jesus to the Cross? What role does the law have for those whose motivation to serve God stems from love? If love fulfills the law, what need is there for the law?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 17.

FIRST LOVE (1 John 4:19).

Sometimes, the deepest thoughts arise from the simplest expressions. Such as 1 John 4:19. It’s bare, sparse, yet it comes heavy-laden with deep meaning. Science, technology, and philosophy could never begin to plumb the depths of this verse; all they could do is bounce off it, like rubber bullets against a brick wall.

Look up 1 Corinthians 2:14. What in that text reveals the basic inadequacy of these other disciplines (science, technology, philosophy) in discerning the meaning of this verse?

Textual evidence for 1 John 4:19 implies that the word *him* might not belong there; if so, it would read, “We love, because he first loved us.” Either way, the basic point remains: We love only because we have been loved. And not just by anyone, but by our Creator.

And that’s a crucial point. If evolution explains us, if we are nothing but the chance products of mere matter and energy, then where did love come from? How has love—not necessarily related to survival—been wedged into the human paradigm? In the Darwinian model, the matter that mutated toward love should have been buried under twenty feet of muck (somewhere between trilobites and *Australopithecus*); our bough of love should be a dried-up twig ending with a cold, dead bud, not a robust branch climaxing into rich foliage at the tree’s apogee. Love is an inexplicable development among those deemed the fittest to survive, those who have reached the topsoil and beyond.

In the Christian model, however, love comes from God (where else?). And we love because God loved us—first. Notice the one modifier in the text, “first.” Humans love because love flows out from God to us. Without receiving that love, we could never manifest it. Although the immediate context of the verse deals specifically with Christians, with those who profess to know God and His love, even those who do not know or love God are, when they manifest love, merely reflecting an attribute of their Creator. For Christians, however, the response to God’s love for us is that we love back, not just God but humanity, as well. Of all the people in the world, we should, indeed, be the most loving of others, because we know that God loved us first.

Why does the knowledge that God first loved us mean that we should love? See 1 John 4:11. After all, just because our spouse or our child or our parents love us, why does that mean we should love others? What is it about the knowledge of God loving us *first* that should cause us to love Him, or anyone else?

Monday

May 12

GOD SENT HIS SON.

It is one thing to say that you love someone. Talk is cheap. How many people only profess their love and then to do things that clearly reveal the hollowness of their words?

In fact, one writer says human love does not exist, if by love we mean “to care selflessly and deeply for someone else.” For example, John loves Mary, and by that we mean that John wants Mary to be happy. However, Mary loves Charles, not John. Now, if John truly loves Mary, then shouldn’t he be glad that Mary has found love with Charles and that Charles makes her happy? After all, if love is unselfish care for someone else, then John should be glad that Mary has found happiness with Charles. Of course, if he loves Mary, as love is commonly understood, then John is going to be miserable over the happiness that Mary has found with Charles. Human love is, indeed, full of contradictions.

However, when God says He loves us, what does that mean? How has He manifested that love for us?

Read 1 John 4:8-10. What are these verses saying that God did in order to reveal His love?

What was it about God sending His Son for our sins that was such an act of love?

Notice the parallel between these verses and the text we looked at yesterday: Both reveal that God’s love for us was prior to our love for Him. It was not our love for God that prompted Him to send Jesus; it was His love for us, even before we loved Him. In fact, even if we had not love God, He would have sent Jesus for us. God’s love for us was not based on anything we could give back to Him. His love transcended ours and was not dependent upon it.

Imagine this: Suppose Christ’s coming to die for us were conditional; that is, He would do it only if human beings first showed enough love toward the Father. If this were the case, where would we be today?

Tuesday

May 13

TO LOVE GOD (1 John 5:3).

Anyone, even God, can say he or she loves someone. But what does that mean? God showed His love for us by sending Jesus to die for our sins. Only as we grasp what that means can we realize the incredible love manifested there in our behalf.

Using these few verses as starters (use whichever ones you like)—Isaiah 53:4-6; Matthew 26:39; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; Colossians 1:16—write down in your own words what happened at the Cross and why, because of this, we love God. As you do, answer these questions: Who was Jesus? What happened to Him at the Cross? What benefit do we get because of the Cross?

No wonder, then, that we love God. Because of Jesus, we have been forgiven our sins. And according to the text for today, we show our love for God by obeying His commandments. Walking with Jesus in obedience is not a matter of mere outward conformity to a set of rules and regulations. A robot could be programmed to do that. Instead, our obedience involves our feelings, thoughts, purposes, and motives—those areas of our lives that are the spring of our actions and behavior. We obey God, not just because we are commanded to but because we love God, because God has shown us that He loves us and wants what’s best for us. The Cross shows us that we can trust the Lord, that He has our best interests at heart. We obey not because we want to be saved but because He has already saved us, because, through Jesus, our sins have been forgiven, and because we have the promise of eternal life even now. Because of these things, we love God, and because we love God, we obey His commandments.

“In the heart renewed by divine grace, love is the principle of action. It modifies the character, governs the impulses, controls the passions, subdues enmity, and ennobles the affections.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 59.

Why does God want us to obey His commandments? Why is obedience to God’s commandments an expression of love?

WALKING IN LOVE.

Read Exodus 19:5, 6.

In one sense, there's no great mystery to God's law and why He wants us to keep it. If someone's child were standing next to a ten-foot ledge, wouldn't that person not want his or her child to step over it? Of course. But why? The answer is simple: The law of gravity will cause the child to hit the ground at a specific, calculable rate that will cause the child harm.

And we live in a universe with not just physical laws but moral laws, as well. Just as violation of the physical laws can cause us harm, violation of the moral ones can cause us harm too. God does not want that to happen to us. The reason God does not want bad things to happen to us is, quite simply, that He loves us.

"The law given upon Sinai was the enunciation of the principle of love. . . . God . . . revealed the purpose of the law when He declared to Israel, 'Ye shall be holy men unto Me.' Exodus 22:31."—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 46.

The love of God underlies every precept of His law. The commandments are designed for our happiness, and those who violate them bring about their own ruin.

How does God promise to accomplish His purpose of bringing His people into conformity to the divine principles expressed in His law? Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26, 27; Heb. 10:16.

The law of God is not so much a matter of *doing* as *being*. The Ten-Commandment law is a code of *principles* more than of rules and regulations, of "dos and don'ts." God desires that these principles shall become the principles evidenced in our characters. This is what He means when He promises to write His laws in our hearts. He will make them the very warp and woof of our lives. When this happens, we *are* walking with Christ. Harmony with His precepts becomes our way of life.

What relationship exists between the Ten Commandments declared by God on Mount Sinai and the Beatitudes proclaimed by Christ on the Mount of Blessing? Compare Exodus 20:3-17 with Matthew 5 and see whether you can find similar principles there. Is one possibly the photographic negative and the other the photographic positive of the same picture of God's will?

THE FULFILLING OF THE LAW.

"Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'You shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love . . . is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:8-10, NKJV).

Notice in these verses the relationship the apostle Paul establishes between love and law. There is no tension or contradiction or opposition between them. In other words, he is not saying what we so often hear other Christians say (generally in the context of a debate over the Sabbath): "We don't need to keep the law; what we need to do is love."

Clearly, that is not what Paul is saying here. In fact, he seems to be saying the opposite. Keeping the law is not something that is done instead of love; *keeping the law is a specific manifestation of love*. This is a point many people, even Adventists, tend to forget.

Love is a verb. It involves action. The law is simply a guideline on how love is made manifest, both to individuals and to God.

Looking at the two verses for today, what do you think Paul means when he says that "love is the fulfillment of the law"? Notice, too, the specific commandments He is referring to. Why just those? What point is he trying to make?

One point comes through very clearly from these texts: Faith in Christ in no way releases a person from obedience to the law. On the contrary. Because of Jesus, because of what He has done for us, we love God. If the cross, and what it represents for us, does not make a person love the Lord, nothing will. Because of the Cross, we love God (see 1 John 3:16), and we love others, and the Ten Commandments present an outline of how we express our love for both. Far from negating the law, salvation by faith makes it even more a crucial part of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

How would you respond to this argument: Who needs rules to tell us how to love? After all, is not love something natural? If we love, will we not automatically do the right thing?

FURTHER STUDY: Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, “The Spirituality of the Law” (Matt. 5:19, 20), pp. 51–55.

We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith. . . . If we abide in Christ, if the love of God dwells in us, our feelings, our thoughts, our purposes, our actions, will be in harmony with the will of God as expressed in the precepts of His holy law.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 61.

“Christ must be revealed to the sinner as the Saviour dying for the sins of the world; and as we behold the Lamb of God upon the cross of Calvary, the mystery of redemption begins to unfold to our minds and the goodness of God leads us to repentance. In dying for sinners, Christ manifested a love that is incomprehensible; and as the sinner beholds this love, it softens the heart, impresses the mind, and inspires contrition in the soul. . . .

“The sinner may resist this love, may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does not resist he will be drawn to Jesus; a knowledge of the plan of salvation will lead him to the foot of the cross in repentance for his sins, which have caused the sufferings of God’s dear Son.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 26, 27.

“God does not require us to give up anything that it is for our best interest to retain. In all that He does, He has the well-being of His children in view. . . . Man is doing the greatest injury and injustice to his own soul when he thinks and acts contrary to the will of God. No real joy can be found in the path forbidden by Him who knows what is best and who plans for the good of His creatures. The path of transgression is the path of misery and destruction.”—Page 46.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Go back to Monday’s study and the question of what it means to love someone. How would you respond to the argument dealing with Mary, John, and Charles? What is true love? Can a human being manifest true, unselfish love? If so, how?
2. Look at the Ten Commandments in the context of love. What principles are there that, in fact, if kept, would reveal love to both God and humanity?
3. What dangers arise from an attempt to keep the law without the foundation of love? What would that kind of obedience necessarily lead to?



The Power of Friendship

Charlotte Ishkanian

Nara lives in a village in northern Mongolia. She admits she was not a nice person. She lied, gossiped, and did many other things that she is not proud of. When she attended school in another city, she made friends with young people who influenced her to smoke and drink. Even Nara worried about what was becoming of herself. She felt an emptiness in her life, but she did not know how to fill it.

Nara’s family was worried and told her to come home. But even in the little village, Nara found friends who shared her bad habits. They stayed out late and drank, and sometimes she did not return home. Desperate to get her away from her destructive friends, her family sent her to live with a relative far away from the cities and towns. Nara hated living so far from everyone and soon returned to the village.

Back home, Nara met two young women from Ulaanbaatar, missionaries who were working in the town. A friend of Nara’s was attending a group meeting in the missionaries’ home and invited Nara to go and meet her brother from Ulaanbaatar. Nara was not interested in the meetings, but she wanted to meet her friend’s brother.

Nara went to the meeting and felt the love of the young people. She continued to attend the meetings and made new friends there. Suddenly, her former friends did not appeal to her. The Christians shared their love for Jesus with her. They spent time talking and singing about God and shared their faith with Nara, drawing her to Christ. Several months later, Nara was baptized.

But Nara’s family was not excited about her Christian friends. When Nara’s uncle came to visit, Nara feared that this strong-willed, anti-Christian man might burn her religious books if he found them. But to her surprise, he listened to her testimony and quietly told her that she had chosen the best path. “Continue growing in your faith,” he said.



Nara thanks God for changing her life. Even her mother admits that Nara’s life is better, and she is now taking Bible studies from the missionaries.

Nara wants to share her faith with others who knew her when she wasn’t such a good girl. She wants them to see what Jesus can do when they turn their lives over to Him.

Nara (left). Charlotte Ishkanian is editor of *Mission*.