

“IF YE LOVE ME”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 16, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

I should like immediately to invite your attention to our text which is found in the 14th chapter of the gospel according to John. During the final week of his life on earth Jesus talked more intimately with his disciples than at any other time. During the final day before his crucifixion Jesus spent several hours with the apostles, giving them final instructions of a special nature. It was in this setting, in the upper room in Jerusalem where he inaugurated the Lord's Supper, that Jesus said, “If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments ... He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself unto him ... If a man love me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. He that loveth me not keepeth not my words: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me.” (John 14:15, 21, 23-34).

Out of his great love for man God sent Christ into the world to do essentially two things: (1) Christ was sent in order that he might redeem man from his sins. In Matt. 1:21, we read, “It is he that shall save his people from their sins.” In I John 1:7, we read, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” (2) Christ was sent that he might show man a new and better way to live. Mankind had become mired in sin and needed to be shown a better way of life. This Christ did by living a perfect example before man and by laying down guidelines, or regulations, for man to follow in order to make his life successful. The New Testament largely consists of these commandments, or guide-lines, which Jesus laid down for man. They were not arbitrarily given, as many suppose, but actually were given by a loving Father who desires that man might be happy and successful. Instead of being limitations upon man's freedom and hindrances to man's happiness, the commandments of God are provided in order that man might be free and happy in the deepest sense.

A number of years ago my family and I lived in California for a period of some eight years. We found time each year to visit Yosemite National Park, one of the most beautiful spots on the face of the earth. There, a beautiful well-watered valley is surrounded by sheer monolithic granite cliffs that rise from the valley floor some three thousand feet. When one climbs to the top of one of these promontories he has a marvelous vantage point from which to look down at the valley floor. He sees the little buildings, the tiny automobiles, the tinier people, and the various roads that lace the valley floor. From his vantage point he is in a position to see what the traveler on the roads below cannot immediately see. For example, he can see that a certain road winds around behind beautiful pine trees to the valley dump where the refuse and garbage of the valley's inhabitants are brought. Not until the last turn of the road can the traveler in the valley below see this destination. From the highway promontory a man can also see that other roads wind about the valley floor and come to magnificent scenic spots, such as that surrounding Mirror Lake or Happy Isles. God sees our lives in similar fashion, and God places some “stop” signs on certain roads because they lead to the dump heap. God places “go” signs on other roads because they lead to happiness and success. God's commandments are never arbitrary, but are motivated by his infinite love for man.

Christ's Guidebook for Man

The New Testament is Christ's guidebook for man. It is filled, in a sense, with directions and commands which men must respect. These are so comprehensive that they cover man's thoughts, man's words, and man's actions. They deal with all aspects of man's life. For example, some of them deal with man's relationship with God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gave instructions concerning worship, “Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else ye have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. When therefore thou doest arms, sound not a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have the glory of men ... And when ye pray, ye shall not be as the hypocrites: for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the corners of the street, that they may be seen of men ... Moreover when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance, for they disfigure their faces, that they may be seen of men to fast.” (Matt. 6:1, 2, 5, 16). These and other commandments emphasize that our devotion to God must be genuine and not hypocritical, if it is to be accepted.

Some of the commands have to do with man's relationship to things. For example, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also ... Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on ... But seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matt. 6:19-21, 25, 33). One of man's greatest areas of stress is in the area of materialism. How much happier mankind would have been down through the centuries, how much less anxiety there would have been, if only man had taken this directive from the Lord to heart. If only man could realize, as Jesus said, “A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” (Luke 12:15).

Some of the commandments in the New Testament deal with man's relationship to his fellowmen. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment ... Ye have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, Resist not him that is evil: but whosoever smitteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also ... Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you." (Matt. 5:21-22, 38-39, 43-44).

On an entirely different aspect of human relations, Jesus answered the question, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? by saying, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder ... And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery." (Matt. 19:3, 6, 9). Christ's teaching of one woman for one man for life would have meant more careful courtships, more determined efforts on the part of marriage partners and less broken homes. This, in turn, would have meant the elimination of much suffering on the part of husbands and wives and infinite suffering on the part of children. God's way is obviously best.

Matters of Doctrine

In addition to these commandments there are still others that deal with such matters as how to become a Christian, how to worship, and how to live the Christian life. The necessity of faith in Christ as the divine Son of God, and public confession of that faith before one's fellowmen is mentioned in Romans 10:9-10, in these words, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved: for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Repentance, or turning away from the sins of the world, was mentioned by the Lord in Luke 13:3, when he said, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." On another occasion Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom Of God." (John 3:5). Thus, baptism was included among his commandments.

Baptism is a matter that has appeared to many people as of little significance. The apostle Paul, guided by the Holy Spirit in writing Romans 6:3-5, indicated the rich symbolic meaning of baptism, "Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection." Symbolically, baptism indicates the death and burial of the old sinful man, and the resurrection of the new person who now follows Christ and wears his name.

Christ's commandments continue, and deal with such matters as worship. For example in John 4:23-24, Jesus taught the woman by the well in Samaria, "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." Then there are the teachings that require the Christian to be honest, to possess integrity, to be truthful, to use pure speech, to have pure morals, to be helpful and kind, and to live an exemplary life before men. In a word, love is to characterize his whole being.

Two Tendencies

There are two tendencies in regard to Christ's commandments which are widespread and which need to be resisted. First, there is the tendency on the part of many to disregard certain of Christ's commandments in order to be free from unwanted restraints. For example, Christ's restrictions in regard to marriage are widely disregarded throughout our land today. Similarly, many other facets of Christian living are disregarded because man often wishes to go his own way rather than the Lord's way. This is both dangerous and wrong.

The second tendency which needs to be resisted is the tendency on the part of many to minimize the importance of Christ's so-called doctrinal commandments. A person may say, "I heartily agree with the great central principles of Christianity, but I have no real interest in or concern for the mere doctrinal aspects of Christianity." Man is hardly in a position to determine which of Christ's commands are of major importance and which are of minor importance. Anything that Jesus taught is of great importance.

It is just here that we would emphasize that the genuine, deep love of Christ, mentioned earlier in this message, is the antidote to both these wrong tendencies. If one really loves the Lord, he will not seek to set aside certain of the commandments which to him appear restrictive and unappealing. He will not seek to set aside any of the regulations concerning becoming a Christian, concerning worship, or concerning the Lord's church. Out of his great love for Christ, he will seek to do everything that Jesus directed him to do.

We are all aware that the Old Testament contained many commandments that were grievous to be borne. In Exodus 20:1-17, we read the full text of the ten commandments. We have been informed that these ten developed into some six hundred sixty general commandments which were taught by the rabbis and bound upon Israel. Such a mountain of commandments developed under the Law of Moses that it was utterly impossible for anyone to keep them perfectly. This was a great burden that crushed God's people. We find the conscientious Saul of Tarsus fully aware of the law, genuinely desiring to keep the whole law, and yet frustrated by his own ability

to do so. Hear him as he says, “Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?” Hear him a moment later in his answer, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord ... There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 7:24-25; 8:1). Christ brought the great dynamic motivation for keeping God’s commandments.

In II Cor. 3:4-6, we have this insight, “And such confidence have we through Christ to God-ward: not that we are sufficient of ourselves, to account anything as from ourselves: but our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth light.” Two chapters later the apostle Paul added, “For the love of Christ constraineth us.” (II Cor. 4:15). Here is the secret. The love of Christ gives us the motivation and the strength to do the things that we need to do in order to be pleasing to God. We could not do it on our own, by our own personal determination. Our sheer willpower is not enough. It is only when we are inspired and strengthened by the love of Christ that we find the strength to live as God would have us live. It is Christ’s love that makes the keeping of the regulations of the New Testament from being the burden that those of the Old Testament became to the Jews. His example before us, fully living as men are asked to live, coupled with his great love for us, makes it possible for us to obey God and to be what we ought to be.

Conclusion

We make no mistake about the importance of obedience. Throughout the New Testament we find our Lord emphasizing the necessity of obeying the commandments of God. In the judgment scene described in Matt. 25:41, we read of those who are told, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels,” because they had not fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick, and done the other things that they had been commanded to do. II Thess. 1:7-9 mentions the vengeance of God which comes upon those, “that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” Matt. 7:21-27 further indicates that it is not those who say but rather those who do the Lord’s will who will be saved.

We end as we began with an emphasis upon Christ’s words, “If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments.” We know that a child shows his love for his parents by obedience and by respecting their wishes for him. We know that a young man shows his love for a young woman by doing everything that he can to please the one whom he loves. We know that we show our love for the Lord in the same way--by obeying his commandments and by a deep concern to do his will. Because of Christ’s great love for us, we want to love him in return. Therefore, we find attending his services on Lord’s day a joy instead of a burden. We gladly accept the requirements of faith, confession, penitence, and baptism in order to wear his name and be Christians. We gladly worship, study our Bibles, and live his kind of life. These are not great burdens to be borne, but joys to be appropriated because of the love that we feel for him. “The love of Christ constraineth us.”