

# Works of Love

An Explanation of Søren Kierkegaard's Book

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## First Series

### Chapter I

#### Love's Hidden Life and Its Recognizability by Its Fruits

Kierkegaard begins this book by stating that it is easy to be “self-deceived,” either to believe that which is not true or not to believe that which is true. However, the most terrible self-deception is “[t]o defraud oneself of...love,” either by not believing in love or by misunderstanding love for what it really is. Either of these would constitute an “eternal loss,” because it is love that connects the temporal (and earthly) with the eternal (and heavenly). Kierkegaard is saying that true, biblical love is the important and necessary connection between life in the present realm and eternal life.

He goes on to quote Jesus, who said in Luke 6:44 that “*every tree is known by its own fruit.*” That the love of which Christianity speaks is known by its own fruit means that “it has within itself eternity’s truth.” “What is it,” Kierkegaard asks, “that connects the temporal with eternity, what else but love, which for that very reason is before everything and remains after everything is gone?” Love is the essential component of Christianity—that God has promised eternal life to those who appropriately love both God and man. Thus, Christian love is eternal, i.e., it takes into account Christianity’s promise of eternal life and all the ideas surrounding it, about which Kierkegaard does not bother to go into detail right now.

Instead, he comments that the origin of Christian love is in a hidden and secret place—in a person’s “heart,” the innermost being, that cannot be observed. As much as any of us tries to see this hidden place, it remains impenetrable, but it is also “love’s desire” that this “secret source” remain hidden in order to protect its humble and profound nature. The “joy and blessing” of love are found in its source’s remaining hidden so that it is willing to love without flaunting or bragging about its secret source. And what is its source? It is God and his love. “Love’s hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness with all existence. Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person’s love originate even more deeply in God’s love.” Remember that Kierkegaard was writing in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century before the invention of deep water exploration equipment. Yet, he is saying that God’s love within us connects us to the very source of our existence—God. In addition, God’s love within us can never be directly seen by either ourselves or others, because it resides at too deep a level to be seen.

Nevertheless, even though the *source* of love is hidden deep within a person, Kierkegaard states that true, biblical love is always active and on the move. In addition, it is characterized by an understanding of the eternal issues surrounding it, i.e., of God’s promise of eternal life and all that is involved in acquiring his promise. Therefore, love insists on making itself known. While the source of love remains hidden, the fruit of love does not. In fact, the fruit of love must never remain hidden.

Kierkegaard uses the metaphor of a tree. “The tree is known by its *fruits*. It is true that the tree is also known by its *leaves*, but the fruit is still the essential mark.” While a tree has both leaves and fruit, the fruit is the tree’s primary characteristic. Kierkegaard uses this metaphor to say that words are “the leaves” of love while actions filled with truth are the “fruit” of love, and he quotes the “Apostle John...(I John 3:18), ‘Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth.’” Notice that “the essential mark” of love is not just *actions*. It is *actions* combined with *truth*. What does

Kierkegaard mean by “truth?” He is referring to Christianity and biblical truth. Therefore, the presence of Christian truth in a human being is important for *how* an action is performed. A person could give all his possessions to the poor, but if his actions are strictly self-loving and not combined with *true* truth, i.e., biblical truth, instead of truth that someone just thinks is true but he is wrong, it is “no work of love at all.” Therefore, biblical love is not just about the “what” of love but more fundamentally about the “how” of love, which is the key in recognizing the fruits of love. The idea of distinguishing between the “what” and the “how” of love is a bit obscure, but Kierkegaard will unpack it throughout the rest of his book.

Here, he goes on to say that, in contrast to what we might think, the fact that love is known by its fruits is not a license for us to go around looking for hypocrites by judging other people’s actions and claiming that we know when people are being loving and when they are not. Instead, love’s “recognizability by its fruits” is for the “single individual,” who stands “in fear and trembling before God” and who performs actions of love, not so that the authenticating fruits *will* be obvious to God and everyone else, but so that they *could* be known by Him and others. “But the one who is busily occupied tracking down hypocrites, whether he succeeds or not, had better see to it that this is not also a hypocrisy, inasmuch as such discoveries are hardly the fruits of love.” In other words, biblical love does not seek to evaluate other people’s love. It just loves. Kierkegaard does go on to say that, nevertheless, our love “will expose every hypocrite who comes near” us, but, perhaps, without our even knowing it. Thus, we are to protect ourselves against the prideful motivation of comparing and showing off our love to others, instead of contenting ourselves with God’s solely knowing the fullness of our love (cf. Luke 12:4,5).

In conclusion, Kierkegaard says that he has made two points in the opening chapter of his book—1) We must believe in love for eternity’s sake, in spite of the hiddenness of its origin, and 2) Love is recognizable by its own fruits. Notice, however, that he has been rather unclear when it comes to describing exactly how to recognize authentic love in another person. Why has he been unclear? I think it is because he wants to preserve the notion that the *source* of love is God’s love working in our hearts and therefore remains hidden deep within our innermost beings. Yet, Kierkegaard still ends the chapter by saying, “Like is known only by like; only someone who abides in love can know love, and in the same way his love is to be known.” Thus, in typical fashion, Kierkegaard is making us work at understanding his exact meaning so that we must think through these ideas in order to own them for ourselves.

## Chapter IIA

### You *Shall* Love

#### Introduction

Kierkegaard quotes Matthew 22:39: “But the second commandment is like [the first]: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” [cf. Leviticus 19:18]. This biblical commandment, he says, presupposes that everyone loves himself. Certainly, the rest of the world presupposes the same thing, right? Well, yes, but not in the same sense as Christianity. There is self-love, and then there is *proper* self-love. The poet speaks of you who loves another person *more than yourself*. Christianity speaks of you who loves another person *as yourself*. The main difference is that Christianity ties love to the eternal, to God and his promise of eternal life, while the poet thinks only of persons in the present realm. Thus, both erotic love and friendship are poetic love for the neighbor but lack the mark of the eternal. They are “based on preference.” We prefer to love the beloved or the friend and not others. Christian love loves the neighbor—the person nearest you, whether friend or foe, whether lovable or unlovable. Therefore, the biblical neighbor is “actually the redoubling/duplication of your own self.” In other words, the “neighbor” might as well be you. And how would you treat you? As someone who is closer than either the beloved or the friend, i.e., with love. Thus, “[t]o love yourself in the right way and to love the neighbor correspond perfectly to one another; fundamentally they are one and the same.”

But this kind of love also has certain, profound psychological implications. “When the depressed person desires to be rid of life, indeed of himself, is this not because he is unwilling to learn earnestly and rigorously to love himself? When someone surrenders to despair because the world or another person has faithlessly left him betrayed, what then is his fault...except not loving himself in the right way?” Kierkegaard is not so naïve as to think that the elimination of depression and despair is as easy as a person flipping a switch inside himself so that he now “loves himself in the right way.” He is only suggesting that, since Christianity presupposes proper self-love, then self-love includes acceptance of who we are as human beings whom God has created and who exist in this world to fulfill the commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Obviously, we cannot love our neighbor if we do not exist with him in this realm, and Kierkegaard is suggesting that only God has the right to end our lives when he so chooses.

#### Section I

The commandment “You *shall* love” contains an apparent contradiction: that love is a duty, which seems burdensome and wrong. Love should occur spontaneously and not because we feel as though we *have to* love. After all, is not spontaneous love what we experience when we first meet that special someone in our lives? We did not force ourselves to be loving. It just happened—spontaneously, springing up uncontrollably from our hearts with all the giddy feelings that the poet loves to extol. Therefore, spontaneous love feels like the best love.

But Christianity begs to differ. The highest love is not spontaneous. It is the love that senses the “obligation to love” and “is a change of eternity.” Spontaneous love is fickle—dependent “on the play of feelings, drives, inclinations, and passions.” Biblical love always comprises “the earnestness of eternity” and remains “duty-bound.” For example, “worldly goods” such as money, prestige, and reputation come from outside us. They are “external” and “unimportant” with respect to eternity while the “goods of the spirit are only in the inner being” where we find the mark of the eternal in us as humans. Thus, we

might lose all our worldly goods and thereby undergo a huge change in our lives. However, eternity, i.e., God, preserves the goods of the spirit so that they remain unchanged regardless of our circumstances. Worldly goods are seen. The goods of the spirit are unseen and secret for and within the single individual.

Kierkegaard goes on to say that, as Christians, after a while we have a tendency to take the truths about God and love for granted. We might grow up in a certain tradition or join a particular church, and we end up hearing about these truths week after week in sermon after sermon, or read about them in book after book, resulting in our losing a sense of the freshness and earnestness of them. The important thing is for each of us to retain our sense of being a “single individual” before God.

This last idea, the “single individual,” is key for Kierkegaard and is one of the reasons why we Christians can get a bit nervous when he talks about it in the light of our being members of particular denominations and traditions within Christianity. Yet, “[i]s not every generation equally close—that is, equally duty-bound to make this [i.e., the specific truth about love] perfectly clear to itself?” Here Kierkegaard touches on one of the major themes in all his writings—the importance of each individual’s pounding out for himself or herself the message of the Bible. Kierkegaard is assuming the Bible to be the only authoritative source of true information about God and reality (cf. the chapter entitled “The Historical Point of View” in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to ‘Philosophical Fragments’*—pages 23-49).

He is pointing out our tendency to rely on other authorities for our understanding of the Bible, such as Bible teachers, theologians, creeds, commentaries, and our traditions. For Kierkegaard, we can *reference* these other sources, but we should not *rely* on them. Each of us, before God, has the responsibility to learn the Bible *as best we can*. Obviously, some people are more capable of wrestling with the biblical texts than others. Nevertheless, in Kierkegaard’s opinion, to whatever degree we can with the time (or lack thereof) that we have, we should look only to the Bible for our understanding of its message. We might listen to Bible teachers and read theologians, creeds, commentaries, and explanations of our tradition, including doctrinal statements of our church, but, in the end, each of us is responsible for what he believes the Bible is saying, not for what others claim it says. In Kierkegaard’s day in Denmark, Christianity had become a culture of long-held traditions reaffirmed week after week by respected Bible teachers and theologians. Kierkegaard was suggesting to his fellow Christians that they had lost the “earnestness of eternity” by succumbing to “the indolence of habit” in their practice of Christianity where the Christian community, the Church, had been “set...in place of the single individuals.” Such a substitution Kierkegaard calls “a terrible thing.”

This last topic is one that is near and dear to my own heart. I have been working on the issue of the nature of the Bible and the nature of human knowledge for several years now. Another key idea for Kierkegaard that comes through loud and clear in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is the limitations of the accuracy and certainty of human knowledge for all Bible students *other than the biblical authors themselves*. In other words, while we can count on the Bible to be true and accurate (which I realize some would want to debate), all interpreters of the Bible are not. Therefore, we must grant each other a lot of love, patience, and room as we all pursue an understanding of the biblical message. The problem is that just a cursory glance at Christian history shows that Christians have been anything but loving and patient. Few Christians have granted room in their interactions with others on the subject of biblical doctrine, which has also been the case towards people of other religions. What I appreciate about Kierkegaard is that he is calling for us to respect each other’s individuality and personal knowledge in the pursuit of truth. Ultimately, each of us is accountable only to God and the Bible, not to any other human being.

## Section II

When love is grounded in duty (You *shall* love), it is “eternally secured against change.” It is also independent of others, except God, and is “secured against despair.” This love needs no oath of fidelity between the two beloveds or friends, because it cannot be changed. Neither do individuals have to test each other’s love. Only God tests a person’s love for that particular individual’s sake—to demonstrate to him that he has *eternal* love—like Abraham (cf. Genesis 22 and Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*).

The opposite is “spontaneous love” that is “instinctual and inclinational” and that can easily undergo four different changes that expose it as lacking the eternal. First, spontaneous love can easily “be changed into its opposite, into *hate*.” When the beloved is unfaithful, when the friend rejects, then spontaneous love easily slips into hate, into the very opposite of love as a result of feelings being hurt and expectations being dashed. In contrast, Christian love that is grounded in the duty that flows from the promise of eternal life would still love, even if the outward form and structure of our human relationships radically change.

Second, spontaneous love can easily “become the sickness of *jealousy*.” When the lover *irrationally* agonizes over whether or not his beloved loves him, when the friend *irrationally* wonders if he can hold on to his friend, then spontaneous love, which was “the greatest happiness,” has become “the greatest torment.” The jealous person “does not hate” the beloved or the friend. Far from it. Instead, with jealousy “he tortures himself with the flame of reciprocal love,” and it slowly eats away at him until he is miserable and unable just to love. Christian love, however, that is grounded in the duty that flows from the promise of eternal life would still love, struggling to tame the *irrational* fears and jealousy.

Third, spontaneous love can change into mere “habit,” thus losing “its ardor, its joy, its desire, its originality, its freshness.” The lovers just live with each other in a rather pedestrian and dull manner. The spark is gone and so is their love. The friends simply habitually get together. Gone is the spontaneous interest in each other’s lives. Instead, habit has replaced true friendship. “If, however, love has undergone eternity’s change by becoming duty, it does not know habit,” which, in turn, makes love “free” and “independent.” When our love is founded upon God’s love for us and God’s promise of eternal life, then our love is dependent only on our sense of duty under God’s grace and not on how others treat us. We are thus free from needing either someone to love or someone to love us.

Fourth, spontaneous love can manifest that we are in despair if we meet with “misfortune.” If things, such as financial disaster, relational problems, health problems, and a myriad of other difficulties go badly for us in this life and render us unmotivated and unable to love people, especially if these people are part of the reason we are suffering, we despair, falling into a state of hopelessness where life hardly seems worth living. Yet, “despair is to lack the eternal,” because it has succumbed to hopelessness. Despair means that we are counting on the things of our temporal life on earth, even our practice of Christianity, to fulfill and satisfy us. We are relating ourselves with “infinite passion” to earthly things, when we should relate with “infinite passion...only to the eternal.” Therefore, “love’s commandment forbids despair—by commanding one to love.” But the absence of despair does not mean that we never feel the pain of suffering. It is only human to do so. We sorrow and hurt and sometimes weep, because it would be inhuman not to. Nevertheless, God’s promise of eternal life guards us from hopelessness and despair in the midst of suffering and pain, even in the midst of abundance and joy, while enabling us to continue to fulfill our God-given duty to love.



To summarize, “the commandment [You *shall* love] consumes and burns out the unhealthiness in your love, but through the commandment you will in turn be able to rekindle it when it, humanly speaking, would cease.”

## Chapter IIB

### You Shall Love *the Neighbor*

Kierkegaard begins this chapter with a summary statement: “*It is in fact Christian love that discovers and knows that the neighbor exists, and, what is the same thing, that everyone is the neighbor. If it were not a duty to love, the concept “neighbor” would not exist either; but only when one loves the neighbor, only then is the selfishness in preferential love rooted out and the equality of the eternal preserved.*” Thus, Kierkegaard begins to define the word “neighbor” in the commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39).

For the rest of the chapter, Kierkegaard compares and contrasts *poetic* love with *Christian* love. The former involves erotic (romantic) love and friendship, while the latter involves the neighbor. In addition, the former involves feelings and passions, while the latter involves duty (the *shall* of the commandment). Kierkegaard draws such a strong distinction between the two kinds of love that the reader can get the impression that they are mutually exclusive. In other words, we might be tempted to think that erotic love and friendship can never be included in Christianity; indeed, that they are morally wrong. However, Kierkegaard does not object to erotic love and friendship. He objects to what the poet does with them in comparison to Christian love. The poet praises romantic love and friendship to the extent that he places their *feelings* on a throne and declares (in my words), “Submit to the authority of these feelings, and you will find true love!” In contrast (in Kierkegaard’s words), “Christianity has thrust erotic love and friendship from the throne, the love based on drives and inclination, preferential love, in order to place the spirit’s love in its stead, love for the neighbor.”

Kierkegaard’s criticism of the poet and not of romantic love or friendship per se is more obvious if we notice that he writes, “If, therefore, a person presumes that he is simultaneously able to understand his life with the help of the poet and with the help of Christianity’s explanation, believes he is able to understand these two explanations together, and in such a way that there would be meaning in his life—then he is in error. The poet and Christianity are diametrically opposite in their explanation. The poet idolizes inclination...[while] Christianity dethrones inclination and sets this *shall* in its place.” The key here is to see that Kierkegaard is not objecting to inclinations and feelings of romantic love and friendship. He is objecting to the poet’s *explanation* (a word he uses three times above) of these feelings by enthroning and extolling them as the highest form of love. Feelings are definitely a part of what it means to be human. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard is suggesting that living our lives based upon our feelings of love is to fall short of fulfilling God’s commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

On the one hand, with the poet’s explanation, I love someone because I prefer this person to others. I prefer the beloved, or I prefer the friend. However, such “passionate preferential love is another form of self-love.” Thus, the beloved and the friend are simply the “*other-I*,” i.e., the “*other self*.” In other words, poetically speaking, I love the beloved and the friend because I am really loving the feelings and passions I have for each one of them. I am loving the beloved and friend because I am loving myself on the basis of the “spontaneous combustion” of the “fire” of my passions.

On the other hand, with Christianity’s explanation, I love someone because I am commanded. The person whom I love is my “neighbor” whom I “*shall* love.” Thus, the neighbor is not the “*other-I*” but instead is the “*other you*” whereby love is not “self-love” but “self-denial.” While, in the poet’s explanation of erotic love and friendship, I cannot separate myself, i.e., my feelings, from the other person, in Christianity’s explanation of

love for the neighbor, I remain “eternally and independently” distinct from the other person, because I am operating on the basis of God’s commandment, i.e., my duty to love the other person, not on the basis of my feelings. The result is that I deny my tendency to love only those whom I prefer and instead love those whom God commands me—the neighbor. I reject “self-love” and embrace “self-denial.”

The final concept that Kierkegaard uses to define the neighbor is that of “equality.” “The neighbor is one who is equal. The neighbor is neither the beloved, for whom you have passion’s preference, nor your friend, for whom you have passion’s preference... Nor is your neighbor someone who is more distinguished than you... Nor is the neighbor someone who is more lowly than you.” We tend to love only people we prefer. We prefer the beloved and not anyone else because of our specific romantic feelings towards the beloved. We prefer the friend and not anyone else because of our feelings of friendship towards the friend. We prefer the person who is more distinguished than ourselves, because we like rubbing shoulders with the popular, the powerful, and the beautiful. Who of us is not tempted to be a name dropper? We prefer the person who is more lowly than ourselves, because we like being able to point out to others just how compassionate we are. Who of us does not feel the pride when others find out how caring and loving we are towards the poor and needy?

In contrast, the neighbor is the one who is equal because of “the equality of [every] human being before God.” I may feel an attraction towards the neighbor, or I may not. What matters is the commandment “You shall love your neighbor,” which requires that I fulfill my eternal and divine duty. Therefore, “the neighbor is every person” whereby I make no distinctions on the basis my feelings. Nevertheless, according to Kierkegaard, loving my neighbor involves a paradox. We tend to think of erotic love as the most gentle and tender of all loves. We also consider friendship as the most faithful and sincere of all relationships. However, Kierkegaard claims that Christian love for the neighbor, properly understood, is “a love in earnestness and truth [that] is more tender in inwardness than erotic love” and “more faithful in sincerity than the most celebrated friendship.” How can this be if feelings are dethroned and duty is put in their place? Does not duty have a ring of coldness in the midst of its obligation, while romance and friendship denote a warmth that duty cannot match? After all, if I *have* to love someone when I do not *feel* like it, how could the tenderness of my Christian love ever match the tenderness of romance and friendship? Only if my love has the passion of eternity whereby my “love for God is the decisive factor,” for “from this originates love for the neighbor.” Thus, we see how fundamental is the notion of eternity to Kierkegaard’s understanding of Christian love for the neighbor.

## Chapter IIC

### You Shall Love the Neighbor

Who are *You* in the commandment, “*You* shall love your neighbor as yourself?” Kierkegaard’s answer is that *You* who love your neighbor certainly do not have to give up loving your beloved or your friend. But your love for your neighbor must be the foundational component for these other two loves. In other words, your beloved and your friend share a common element with your neighbor. They in fact are your neighbor, because they share with you “humanity’s inherent kinship with God.” I think what Kierkegaard means is that every human being is made in the image of God (cf. Genesis 1:26,27). In other words, we are all moral and rational beings, capable of discerning and choosing good and evil, logic and illogic, rationality and irrationality, which is what distinguishes us from animals. When a bear kills a human being, we do not put the bear on trial, unlike when a human being kills another human being. The bear has made an *instinctual* choice when it kills. The human being has made a *moral* choice when he does likewise. In addition, try to get a bear to calculate pi, or design and build a Boeing 747, or even diagnose schizophrenia. Only human beings are rational. Indeed, they must be rational in order to think properly about reality. Thus, Christianity is the only truly rational way to think about the meaning and manner of human existence.

In addition, because “Christianity’s joyful message is contained in the doctrine of humanity’s inherent kinship with God,” Christianity’s focus is on what we all share in common as human beings, not on what makes us different. What makes us different are what Kierkegaard calls “the dissimilarities of earthly life.” Some people are wealthy, others are poor; some are “distinguished,” others are “lowly;” some are male, others are female; etc. And when we focus on what we have in common, which is what we have in common with God, and not on our differences, then we also focus on how we should *act* like God. “Christianity’s task [is] humanity’s likeness to God. But God is love, and therefore we can be like God only in loving...” But can a person be like God in loving only the beloved and the friend? Kierkegaard’s answer is no, “because for God there is no distinction.” God does not love people on the basis of their temporal attributes, whether they are distinguished or lowly, wealthy or poor, smart or ignorant, beautiful or plain, male or female. He loves them because they are like him—moral and rational beings. And certainly your beloved is distinct from all other people, as is your friend. Well then, neither should you love *only* your beloved or your friend since they are distinct from all other people.

Therefore, Christianity calls for us to “forsake the dissimilarities...of earthly life,” because every person is our neighbor regardless of any temporal distinctions. We see in all people an “eternal resemblance” and then love them simply on the basis of this resemblance. They are all moral and rational beings who are equally created by the one eternal being, God, and designed for eternal life that they can receive through his mercy. As a result, we are called to choose to “exist equally for...every human being” and to do this “unconditionally.” In other words, we are called to love all others without requiring that they change something about themselves to make them more lovable, as Kierkegaard goes on to explain in detail throughout the rest of the chapter.

First, he addresses the issue of either losing the beloved or a friend, or of never having had the pleasure of being loved by one of these. I suppose that we could add another important category to the discussion—the loss or lack of the love of one’s parents. What if a person has lost the beloved, or a friend, or a parent—through a break-up in a relationship or through death? Or what if someone has never experienced the happiness of the love of a beloved or friend or parent? All that the poet can do is try to

console the broken and lonely hearted through the poetry of brokenness and loneliness. He offers only “compensation for the loss of joy” that comes from being loved by the beloved, the friend, or the parent. The poet tries to console, but he can offer nothing truly substantive in place of the beloved, the friend, or the parent.

In contrast, Christianity “is joy.” Christianity offers a replacement—the neighbor—that brings joy to a human being’s heart! How is this possible? Because Christianity consoles the disconsolate through the *eternal* commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Whenever you lose the beloved, the friend, or the parent, the “change” that has occurred in the person or just in the relationship with the person certainly has taken him from you *in the present life*. Or if you have never experienced the joy of erotic love, friendship, or the parent’s nurturing care, all the poet can do is say, “I’m sorry for your loss (or lack).” But Christianity says, for *You* “the highest still remains: love the neighbor!” Christianity asserts, “You still retain the best in loving the neighbor,” because even if death takes away your neighbor, “life immediately gives you another” since *everyone* is your neighbor. Even if death takes away your beloved, your friend, or your parent, life provides you with plenty of neighbors who share “eternity’s resemblance,” which is our “kinship with God” and thus makes our love for our neighbor higher than our love for the beloved, friend, or parent. The conclusion from this first issue is that *You* of the commandment is the one who always has a neighbor to love and, therefore, always has the best of what love has to offer—loving all people.

Next, Kierkegaard addresses two questions, “the question about the object” of love and then the “question about the love.” He also combines these into one question—is “perfection” found in the object of love or in love? Certainly it makes sense that “erotic love is defined by the object,” that your beloved is different from all other human beings, which is the reason why only this one person is your beloved. The same is true that “friendship is defined by the object,” that your friend is different from all other human beings, which is the reason why only this one person is your friend (notwithstanding, of course, that someone may have more than one friend). Therefore in these two cases “perfection” is found in the object—in the beloved and the friend with the result that love for the beloved and friend is based on their “dissimilarities” that distinguish them from all other human beings. However, “since the neighbor is every human being, ... all dissimilarities are indeed removed from the object, and therefore” the love for the neighbor “is recognizable only by love [and not by the object].” Therefore, “perfection” is found in love, not in the object of love.

Finding “perfection” in love goes along with the fact that “love is a need, the deepest need in the person in whom there is love for the neighbor; he does not need people just to have someone to love, but he needs to love people... Therefore the one who truly loves the neighbor loves also his enemy. The distinction *friend* or *enemy* is a difference in the object of love...” But since the neighbor as an object contains no difference, eternally speaking, from any other person, the distinction between *friend* and *enemy* goes away. The *enemy* is made in the image of God with moral and rational capabilities just as much as the *friend*. Thus, the *enemy* has just as much “eternal resemblance” as the *friend*. Kierkegaard admits that “people think that it is impossible for a human being to love his enemy, because, alas, enemies are hardly able to endure the sight of one another. Well, then, shut your eyes—then the enemy looks just like the neighbor.” The conclusion from this second issue is that *You* of the commandment is the one who understands that “perfection” is found in his love and not in his beloved or friend so that both his enemy and his friend are equally his neighbor.

The next issue Kierkegaard addresses is how loving the neighbor brings a person into conflict with the rest of the world. The reason is that people who focus on the stuff of the world—wealth and poverty, fame and obscurity, beauty and unattractiveness, health

and disease, men and women—become preoccupied with bringing about “similarity among people in the world, to apportion to people, if possible equally, the conditions of temporality.” The world believes that the most loving thing to do for others is to make them all equal in their economic, physical, and social conditions. However, “Christianity...does not want to take away the dissimilarity” that exists between people. Christianity is realistic and knows that there will always be the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the famous and the obscure, male and female. Neither does Christianity “side in partiality” with one group of people as against another. Christianity does not side with the wealthy against the poor, or with the poor against the wealthy. It does not side with the powerful against the weak, or with the weak against the powerful. It does not side with men against women, or with women against men. While the goal of the “well-intentioned worldliness” is to use “calculations and surveys” to eliminate all temporal differences and make everyone equal, “Christianity, in contrast, aided by the shortcut of eternity, is immediately at [its] goal: it allows all dissimilarities to stand but teaches the equality of eternity. It teaches that everyone is to *lift himself up above*” all worldly differences. How? By recognizing that as an individual he shares a resemblance to God by having been made in his image, that he is a moral and rational being designed for eternal life that comes through God’s mercy and forgiveness. Therefore even the rich and powerful are to *lift themselves up* just as much as the poor and weak. They are to appreciate their having been created by God in his image more than the fact that they have become wealthy and powerful and thus love those who share this “eternal resemblance,” i.e., everyone, since everyone is their neighbor.

Thus, “Christianity allows all the dissimilarities of earthly life to stand... [However], everyone who...has clung to one or another of the dissimilarities of earthly life so that he centers his life in it, not in God, also demands that everyone who belongs to the same dissimilarity must hold together with him...in an ungodly alliance against the universally human.” The wealthy demand that other wealthy people form an alliance with them and stand against the poor. The poor demand that other poor people form an alliance with them and stand against the wealthy. One gender demands that others of the same gender form an alliance with them and stand against the other gender. One ethnic group demands that others of the same ethnic group form an alliance with them and stand against other ethnic groups. And each “one...calls it treason to want to have fellowship with others, with all people.”

The irony is that each group, defined by a worldly difference such as wealth, gender, ethnicity, etc. “wants to do away with one dissimilarity [e.g., wealth, power, or in Christianity, differences in doctrine], but [they want] another [dissimilarity] put in its place.” Here Kierkegaard is using the word dissimilarity in an ambiguous way. He is calling equality of wealth or equality of power among people a “dissimilarity,” which does not seem to make sense. Would not people who are equal in wealth be “similar” and not “dissimilar”? Yes, and no. They are equal in wealth, but this equality is not “eternity’s equality.” It is only an “earthly” equality since wealth is but a worldly and temporal characteristic. Thus, it is not the “highest” equality, i.e., being made in the image of God which is our “kinship with God,” and therefore it lacks the substance of “eternity.” Even Christian doctrine is a worldly attribute, because only Jesus and the apostles had their doctrine absolutely correct. Therefore, what a surprise it must be to us that “everyone who struggles against dissimilarity in such a way that he wants one specific dissimilarity removed and another put in its place, is, of course, fighting” to retain worldly characteristics instead of looking only at eternity’s similarity of the fact that we are all made in the image of God. “Whoever then will love the neighbor, whoever does not concern himself” with eliminating earthly distinctions amongst people, but instead infuses his own worldly differences with the resolve to love all people equally and even allow the

differences allotted to them by life to remain, “that person easily becomes like someone who does not fit into earthly life here, not even in so-called Christendom” [which focuses so much on demanding that others adopt its doctrinal uniformity instead of focusing on our moral accountability before God]. “He is easily exposed to attacks from all sides; he easily becomes like a lost sheep among ravenous wolves. Everywhere he looks, he naturally sees” the worldly differences amongst people; “and those who in a worldly way have clung firmly to a temporal” distinction, “whatever it may be, are like ravenous wolves.”

Kierkegaard goes on to “cite some examples of the dissimilarity of earthly life in order to clarify the issue” of who are these ravenous wolves. If a “distinguished person” chose not to associate only with other distinguished persons but also with the lowly and downtrodden as he obeyed the commandment to love his neighbor as himself, he would encounter a “double danger.” On the one hand, he would be called a traitor by those who are distinguished, because he was not aligning himself with only their group. On the other hand, he would be “misunderstood and misjudged” by the lowly if he only wanted to love them as his neighbors and permit their dissimilarity, their lowliness, to remain. If, instead, he chose to “lead [the lowly] in revolt” that would eliminate the difference between the “distinguished” and the “lowly,” then, certainly the lowly would consider him their champion. But if all he wants to do is love them as his neighbors and allow the dissimilarity to stand, then they will reject him just as much as his own “distinguished” group does. Thus the “double danger.”

The same would happen to the “lowly person” who sought to love all people as his neighbors and even rejoiced for the distinguished, the wealthy, the powerful, and the beautiful that they possess these particular distinctions in earthly life in contrast to the lowly. “His peers would perhaps push him away as a traitor, scorn him as slave-minded, and, alas, the privileged would perhaps misunderstand him and deride him as a climber... That is how dangerous it is to will to love the neighbor.”

Kierkegaard is saying in part, beware of those who would blame the wealthy and the powerful for all life’s ills, and beware, too, of those who would blame the poor and the weak for all life’s ills. “To love the neighbor is, while remaining in the earthly dissimilarity allotted to one, essentially to will to exist equally for...every human being” and to do so “unconditionally.” The tenth of the Ten Commandments states, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor’s house, his field or his male servant or his female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17). Kierkegaard concludes from this commandment that you shall not covet even the *advantage* granted your neighbor in the current realm. “In this way the one who loves the neighbor is at peace. He neither cravenly avoids the more powerful but loves the neighbor, nor superiorly avoids the more lowly but loves the neighbor and wishes essentially to exist equally for all people.” It is “like looking at a play.” When the curtain falls on the stage, “then the one who played the king and the one who played the beggar, etc. are all alike.” They are all people with the mark of eternity, made in the image of God. They may appear outwardly unequal and different, but inwardly they are all equal and similar. The dissimilarities that we possess in this world are simply ways that temporality confuses us and deceives us into thinking that people are actually different. But the “neighbor” is the way eternity abolishes the confusion and shows forth our equality before God.

In the middle of his discussion of examples, Kierkegaard states that “the measure of a person’s disposition is this: how far is he from what he understands to what he does, how great is the distance between his understanding and his actions.” Kierkegaard firmly believes that “basically we all understand the highest. A child, the simplest person, and the wisest all understand the highest and all understand the same thing, because it is, if I

dare to say so, one lesson we are all assigned.” What is the “highest” that he claims everyone understands? That there is a God before whom we are morally accountable for our actions and from whom we need his mercy and forgiveness, and that love for the neighbor, i.e., all people, is higher than love for the beloved or the friend. Kierkegaard is saying that when people refuse to believe in God, appeal to him for mercy, and love their neighbor as themselves, it is not because they lack the proper information. It is simply because they are unwilling. But life tests the distance between people’s natural understanding of God and whether or not they are willing to act on their understanding. Anybody can say he believes in God and even act piously as a demonstration of his belief—when life is calm and quiet. But when “the confusion of life” hits and everything is collapsing all around him, then the real distance between his profession of belief and his actions shows forth, even in regard to a person’s recognizing who is his neighbor. “At a distance all recognize the neighbor; God alone knows how many there are who recognize him in actuality—that is, close at hand.” Thus Kierkegaard can say, “if you do not see [the neighbor] so close at hand that before God you unconditionally see him in every human being, you do not see him at all.”

In summary, who are *You* of the commandment, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*”? *You* are the one who always has a neighbor to love and therefore always has the best of what love has to offer—loving all people. *You* are the one who understands that “perfection” is found in your love and not in your beloved or friend so that both your enemy and your friend are equally your neighbor. And *You* are the one who is willing to experience the rejection of the whole world as you ignore your own earthly position in life and those who are both similar to and different from you in their worldly characteristics. *You* are also the one who is willing to love all others, because they share eternity’s equality of being made in the image of God, while allowing their temporal similarities and differences to stand as life has allotted to each.



## Chapter IIIA

### Romans 13:10 – Love Is the Fulfilling of the Law

In this chapter, Kierkegaard pursues the task of explaining the apostle Paul's statement in Romans 13:10 that "love is the fulfillment of the Law." To what Law is Paul referring—that of the Hebrew scriptures, in the Torah. Kierkegaard begins by referring to a parable Jesus presents in Matthew 21:28-31, in which a father asks his two sons to work in his vineyard. The first son responds, "No," but then he changes his mind and goes out to work. The second son responds, "Yes," but he does not go out to work. Kierkegaard uses this parable to warn against making promises. A person can be "rich in good intentions and quick to promise." But "eternity is suspicious of promises," because they can be very deceiving, even self-deceiving. Thus, the son who initially said "No" was closer to authentic repentance than the son who said "Yes." In his writings (cf. *The Moment* and *Late Writings*, pgs. 47, 133-136), Kierkegaard warns people who initially and enthusiastically believe they will obey God and his commandments that their enthusiasm is not coming from an accurate understanding of themselves. If they had a clear picture of who they really are as human beings, then they would know that they cannot obey God appropriately apart from his causing them to do so by his grace.

"What is love?" Paul answers, "It is the fulfilling of the Law." It is the "essentially Christian, which is not related to knowing but to acting." Kierkegaard likes to make the distinction between esthetics (feelings), ethics (actions), and the religious (Christianity). Here he is saying that the "religious," the essentially Christian must include ethics, i.e., action. Thus, the title of his book is *Works of Love*. Christian love manifesting itself in action is certainly its "decisive" nature. "Yet this is not busyness, least of all a worldly busyness." To be busy is to be "divided and scattered" while Christian love is "whole and collected." Christian love is "not that hidden, private, mysterious feeling" that the poet speaks of, but instead it is "sheer action," albeit within the biblical worldview.

The apostle Paul also says in Romans 10:4 that "Christ was the end of the Law," because he was the perfect "fulfilling of the Law." Therefore, "he was Love" so that his love was the highest of "sheer action." At no moment was his love "merely the inactivity of a feeling." Also, when Christ loved people, he placed "no demand upon any other person." Instead, he loved a person strictly for that person's benefit. And his love made no distinction between people. "His divine-human love was equal for all people, since it wanted to save them all, and equal love for all who would allow themselves to be saved." But Kierkegaard encourages us not to forget that there was "an eternal difference between Christ and every Christian," because he was the perfect "fulfilling of the Law."

"God is an eternity ahead" of us in His love for us, which means that "before God we are nothing" and "at an infinite distance from having achieved something." No matter how much we love, even Christianly, we are still "in infinite debt" to what love really is, i.e., to God. Therefore, in this life where people will admire you and applaud you for your achievements, "if you want to be well off and yet easily manage to become something... then forget God" and "never let it become really clear to you that it is He who has created you from nothing." To speak about love as the fulfilling of God's Law is to draw attention to the fact that we are in infinite debt to God and his love, because each one of us falls so far short of God and Christ and their perfect love. Consequently, falling short of God's perfect love should lead us to "acknowledge [our] own guilt," and it also makes "every human being guilty" along with us since no one loves perfectly like God.

While it is true that love is the fulfilling of the Law, there is still an important difference between the Law and love. The "Law is like a laborious speaker" who never explains completely what he is trying to say. Thus, the Law is "indefinite" and "indeterminate."

The Law is like an architect's plans for a building. The plans are merely a vague resemblance of the building. But once the building is built, then you have something definite and concrete. So if a person acts on the basis of the Law, and acts in love, then we can see something definite, because "love is the sum of the commandment" (1 Timothy 1:5). There are 613 commandments in the Law of the Hebrew scriptures. But even with all these "provisions," i.e., commandments, we do not have a clear picture of what love is. Only when we act in the moment that requires that we love do we have something concrete, i.e., that we have something we can actually call love and that clearly is love. Thus, Christian ethics are not only based on the Bible but are also situational. We may attempt to think biblically about what love would look like in a hypothetical situation. However, it is only when we act in the very moment of the situation that we actually know what love is, because we are *taking into account all the factors that confront us that no one else can possibly know except us*. Then love becomes definite and concrete.

Kierkegaard comes the closest to defining love so far by saying, "*To love God is to love oneself truly; to help another person to love God is to love another person; to be helped by another person to love God is to be loved.*" True love is such because "*worldly wisdom is of the opinion that love is a relationship between persons; Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: a person--God--person; that is, God is the middle term.*" So "to love God is true self-love." But this kind of self-love is exactly what is necessary in order to love others, which means then that "to love another person as God is to deceive oneself, and to allow another person to love one as God is to deceive this other person." No one should ever assume God's position in another person's life. To worship and idolize people is idolatry, just as to be worshiped and idolized by people is idolatry. To worship God and love people is true love.

Jesus said that unless one "hates his father and mother and sister," he cannot love him. Kierkegaard understands Jesus' statement to mean that Christian love is so different from worldly love, that when a Christian loves a non-Christian, the latter will interpret the Christian's love as hate. Kierkegaard does not mean pure hate, but he is speaking of a reaction to love whereby ultimately the non-Christian wants no part of love, because it involves God. The Christian, by definition, makes God the "middle term" in his relationship with the non-Christian even if the latter does not want to grant God this position. However, by not making God the "middle term," the non-Christian declares that he is *against* the love being expressed by the Christian. He does not love true love, and he does not love God. Therefore, by being offended by the "middle term" in Christian love, i.e., God, the non-Christian can interpret Christian love only as a kind of hate and not actually love.

There is thus a collision between Christ's love, the "divine conception" of love, and worldly love, the "human conception." This is a "collision between the essentially Christian and the merely human" because of the "difference of eternity" between these two conceptions. "The fundamental untruth in the merely human view of love is that love" does not include a "relationship with God," who is "eternity" personified. Therefore, to leave God out of one's love is to make a "difference of eternity" between one's love and Christian love. The result is that even before a lover can relate to his beloved when emotions are running high, the lover must "first relate to God" if love is to be true love. And Christ himself demonstrated this kind of love more than anyone. "[H]e did everything out of love and wanted to bring salvation to humanity, and by what means? By the relationship with God—because he was love...[and] it was the sacrifice of Atonement that he was bringing, that he truly loved the disciples, loved the whole human race, or in any case everyone who would allow himself to be saved."

In addition, Christ's love was in fact an "unhappy love." Why? Because when he loved people, there was always a "horrible collision" with what people really thought love ought to be. So Christ's life did not collide with only what we would naturally consider to be ungodliness—murder, theft, sexual immorality, and the like. He collided also with what we would naturally consider to be love—that he would make life better and happy for his apostles and certainly not worse and unhappy. But, indeed, Christ lived "in order to give himself without resistance into the power of his enemies." And then he left his apostles to suffer the same. Kierkegaard asks, "Was this actually love?!" Yes, he claims, because anyone who becomes a Christian must "willingly...endure being hated as a reward for one's love" even as one "help[s] the other person to love God."

The fundamental concept in Kierkegaard's theology is what other theologians have called *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing). *Creatio ex nihilo* means to Kierkegaard that God has not created the entire cosmos out of material that had already existed *independently* of God. Instead, God spoke the creation into existence "out of nothing" (cf. Genesis 1). But for Kierkegaard, *creatio ex nihilo* also means that God *continues* to create every aspect of the cosmos on an ongoing basis. Therefore, the material of the cosmos and all its aspects never exist independently of God, even as he *sustains* their existence. God also sustains human beings in the same way. Every moment of our lives is another moment of God creating us *ex nihilo*, because we never exist *independently* of God. If God does not cause us to exist at this very moment, basically *out of nothing*, then we simply cannot exist. Kierkegaard takes the concept of God creating *ex nihilo* to its logical conclusion and speaks of a "person's bond service in relation to God, to whom every human being, not by birth but by creation from nothing, belongs a bond servant, and in such a way as no bond servant has ever belonged to an earthly master, who at least admits that thoughts and feelings are free; but he belongs to God in every thought, the most hidden; in every feeling, the most secret; in every movement, the most inward." To put it another way, our free-will choices are free from people, but not from God, because he is constantly creating them out of nothing. Nevertheless, the complete dependence of our choices on God does not excuse us from being accountable for our choices. Indeed, Kierkegaard implies our accountability when he claims that humans rebel against being God's bond servants, because this "service is found to be a burdensome encumbrance." Human beings want to get rid of their dependence on God and claim the right to decide for themselves what they will think, believe, and do apart. They want to love without taking into account God's definition of love and morality.

Then Kierkegaard draws an important, logical inference from the idea of God's being the ongoing creator of us human beings. His conclusion is that we are all made to be equal before God, regardless of our intellectual ability or role in history, including within Christianity. Therefore, each of us is responsible to interpret correctly for himself the Bible (and thereby the Law), which is our only authority and source of truth. In other words, only the biblical authors (Kierkegaard is assuming that the Bible is the inerrant communication of God to humanity), and not their interpreters down through Jewish and Christian history, have the right to tell us what to think, believe, and do. Kierkegaard begins explaining this inference by basically asking the question, "Who has the right to tell me what I should think, or believe, or do in fulfilling the requirement of the Law of love in any particular situation?" Our tendency is to grant such a right to other human beings *outside the Bible*—to Bible teachers, theologians, and traditions. But how do we know if we are listening to teachers, theologians, and traditions that have understood the Bible correctly? Kierkegaard suggests that maybe we should all come to "a common decision...to which the individual then has to submit." But it would be impossible to get everyone together and even to get everyone to agree. So "perhaps the agreement of a number of people" would be sufficient. But "[h]ow large a number is necessary?" he asks

sarcastically. One person might say two, another three, another 300, and so forth until we realize that there is no appropriate number. Why? Ultimately, because “God wants each individual” to study the Bible and the Law and to decide *thoughtfully and carefully* the correct meaning of the biblical texts for himself as a human being whom God is constantly creating *ex nihilo*.

As already stated, Kierkegaard claims that God’s creating us on an ongoing basis means that “one person does not stand essentially higher than another.” We are all equally created *ex nihilo* by God so that no one has the right or authority to tell another individual what to think, believe, or do in terms of what it means to be essentially Christian. The irony, as Kierkegaard points out, is that as soon as we demand that those who disagree with the notion of equality adopt this very perspective, we are guilty of the same thing that they are, i.e., of “mutiny against God.” And the reason is because we are not permitting them to have their own *individual* opinion on even a matter of truth. At the judgment, we will not answer to God for what others have believed and taught us, but for what we have believed to the extent that we took seriously the responsibility to think through the Bible for ourselves.

Because of Jesus’ having granted his apostles the same level of authority and accuracy of understanding of the biblical truth that he had, they also have the right to speak truth into other people’s lives (cf. John 13-17). But it is they and they alone who have the right to tell others what to think, believe, and do. Therefore, ever since the apostles died, their writings, i.e., the Bible, are the only authoritative source of truth for any individual Christian (cf. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pgs. 23-49, 387, 506).

How can I be certain of what the Bible says if someone else teaches it to me instead of my studying it for myself? Even if others are smarter, know the languages of the original biblical texts (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), and hold positions of authority within the institutionalized church, such skills and positions do not mean that they are correct in their interpretations of the Bible. What Kierkegaard is implying is that no one Christian or group of Christians have ever understood the biblical message as completely or accurately as Jesus and his apostles. Therefore, “God wants each individual [with only the Bible in hand], for the sake of certainty and of equality and of responsibility, to learn for himself the Law’s requirement.” Such radical individual responsibility is why Kierkegaard is considered the father of existentialism, the philosophical approach that considers human beings to be somewhat self-defining by the choices that they make on an individual basis. The only problem was that many other existentialists (Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, et al.) left out of their philosophies the most important person who ultimately makes our choices and ourselves meaningful—God.

The difference between how the world defines “love” and how God defines “love” is in how each understands the term “self-love.” They both include in this term the concepts of sacrifice and devotion. But the world calls people to sacrifice only a portion of their self-love in order to remain united with others who also sacrifice a portion of their self-love for the group’s sake. Kierkegaard calls such mutual sacrifice “an alliance in self-love.” In contrast, God understands self-sacrificing love as “love that sacrifices everything in order to make room for God”—as Jesus did. The world is willing to love in a sacrificial way in order to gain other people’s approval and “one’s own earthly advantage,” e.g., power, money, popularity, and fame. This kind of love we typically call “looking out for #1.” But true, biblical sacrifice is unconditional. It loves “without reward”—without expecting anything in return from either God or other people. Biblical love neither expects nor demands any reward, because the Christian makes his decisions “before God, face-to-face with him.” Consequently, God is always the “third party in every relationship” and therefore “the sole object of love.” The “God-relationship

is the mark by which the love for people is recognized as genuine [Christian love]. As soon as a love-relationship does not lead me to God, and as soon as I in the love-relationship do not lead the other to God, then the love, even if it were the highest bliss and delight of affection, even if it were the supreme good of the lovers' earthly life, is still not true love." Therefore, it "is not the husband who is the wife's beloved, but it is God," and vice versa. So the world loves for temporal, earthly gain while "eternity's requirement" of Christian love is that it be willing to give up all hope of "power, honor, and the gratification of desires, etc." in the present realm.

Kierkegaard goes on to warn the reader, "If your ultimate and highest goal is to have life made easy and sociable, then never become involved with Christianity, shun it, because it wants the very opposite; it wants to make your life difficult and to do this by making you alone before God." The world's "desire is to exist for the powerful [or famous, or wealthy, or popular] person." But Christianity's desire is that we exist ultimately for God, even if no one notices us or everyone despises us. Therefore, Christian love in a sense is also "looking out for #1," not for the sake of gaining people's approval or other advantages in the present realm, but for the sake of living under God's grace and obtaining his promise of eternity in the next life. The world's "self-love" is all about me in the short term. God's "self-love" is all about God and me in the long term.

The requirement of the Law according to Kierkegaard is twofold—partly a "requirement of inwardness and partly a requirement of continuance" [perseverance]. The "requirement of inwardness" is similar to what he previously mentioned—not expecting any earthly advantage or external reward now. "The purely human view of love also teaches that love requires no reward—it wants only to be loved, as if this were no reward." The human view of love "is willing to sacrifice this or that and everything, but one still hopes to be understood and thereby to remain in a connectedness of meaning with people, who must acknowledge one's sacrifices and rejoice in them." However, such sacrificial love (so to speak) only "makes a show of forsaking the world, but still remains within the world."

Instead, the requirement of inwardness "understands that before God it has no merit at all" but relies solely on God's grace. "In the Christian sense this is sacrifice, and in the human sense this is...madness." The inwardness of love "must be self-sacrificing" and include "the inwardness of self-denial, which is more explicitly defined not in relation to the beloved's...idea of love but in relation to helping the beloved to love God." The irony of Christian love, however, is that one must "be willing, as reward for its love, to be hated by the beloved" if the beloved does not want to love God and therefore rejects being led in this direction. And to be willing to be thus hated by the beloved "shows that this inwardness is an unalloyed God-relationship. It has no reward, not even that of being loved: thus it belongs entirely to God, or in it the person belongs entirely to God."

The second "requirement of continuance" [perseverance] is the requirement of "the same inwardness throughout the duration of time." It is like an arrow that "flies swiftly through the air horizontally, but...at the same time is supposed to bore down into the earth." The arrow boring into the earth and thus ceasing in its flight is analogous to "when a person in [Christian] self-denial [i.e., true Christian love] has had to make the hardest sacrifice" by suffering rejection and hatred from the person whom he loves, his beloved, which means that eternity has impinged on and affected his love. But then time moves on, and love must also move on, which is analogous to the arrow continuing to fly "swiftly through the air horizontally." The struggle to love Christianly before God is "the hardest of struggles," because it requires continuing to love even when there is no earthly reward for it. And "to struggle with time" and to keep going is "an impossibility" apart from God's causing love to continue by his grace. But it also means that a person is always "infinitely far...from fulfilling the requirement" of the Law. He is even unable to

appreciate how unloving he has been and how much guilt he experienced by not loving properly in the past. The lack of awareness of his shortcomings is because, over time, the effects of his failures diminish in his mind and emotions. He easily forgets how far short of the Law he fell in his attempts to love other people. Perhaps we can hear Kierkegaard's own regrets in regard to his having broken off his previous engagement to Regina. But "no amount of time changes the requirement, eternity's requirement—that love is the fulfilling of the Law." And, thus, the one who wants to love Christianly presses on regardless of how often he fails and even if God is the only one who acknowledges the goodness and rightness of his love, i.e., his inwardness.

## Chapter IIIB

### Love Is a Matter of Conscience

Kierkegaard begins this chapter, “If one were to state and describe in a single sentence the victory Christianity has won over the world...—then I know of nothing shorter but also nothing more decisive than this: it has made every human relationship between person and person a relationship of conscience.” With this bold statement, Kierkegaard is clearly enthusiastic about the concept of conscience mentioned in the apostle Paul’s first letter to his co-worker Timothy, “But the sum of the commandment is love out of a pure heart and out of a good conscience and out of a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). Nevertheless, Kierkegaard’s main ideas in this chapter sound familiar to what he has discussed in previous chapters, indeed to what he discusses in most of his writings—that the “essentially Christian” concerns the “individual” and his “inwardness.”

He goes on to say that “just as the blood pulses in every nerve, so does Christianity want to permeate everything with the relationship of conscience.” Then, he describes what he believes the Bible means by this “relationship of conscience.” First, it is that “[t]he change is not in the external, not in the apparent, and yet the change is infinite.” By “infinite,” Kierkegaard means God and his promise of “eternal life.” Therefore, by considering love as a matter of the conscience, God has no intention of changing the external aspects of appropriate relationships. He intends only that a change occur internally and individually in the light of the individual’s desire for eternal life.

Kierkegaard calls attention to the obvious nature of conscience’s pertaining to each “individual” by noting that “[b]efore the minister of the Church joins” two people in marriage, which must already be something they clearly *feel strongly* about doing and have *chosen* to do, “he first asks each one individually: Have you consulted with God and with your conscience?” Thus, the minister of the Church implies that choices can be made merely on the basis of “drives [feelings] and inclinations,” leaving out the all-important role of the conscience. Kierkegaard never explicitly defines what he means by conscience, but he seems to be using the word as we typically do—to describe that inner voice implanted within us by God that acts as a guide to the moral quality of our behavior, making us attentive to the moral obligation we have before God to choose to do what is right. In other words, he is talking about our moral conscience.

Kierkegaard notes that the “worldly or merely human point of view recognizes a great many kinds of love,” but with “Christianity the opposite is the case. It recognizes really only one kind of love” under which all other loves are subsumed so that by considering love to be a matter of conscience, “Christianity [produces] a fundamental change” in all the different kinds of love in the world. “Christianity has not come into the world to teach this or that change in how you are to love your wife and your friend *in particular*, but to teach how you are to love all human beings *universally-humanly*”—including your spouse and your friend.

Therefore, when we engage in a *particular* kind of love, e.g., love for the beloved or love for the friend, Christianity firmly brings the moral conscience into play and thereby places these particular loves under the ultimate authority of Christian love. Kierkegaard further notes that these particular loves are “based on drives and inclination.” In addition, for the world or the poet, a person’s “drives and inclinations...seem to be quite adequate to decide whether” or not erotic love for the beloved or friendly love for the friend ought to exist. However, the “essentially Christian challenges” this notion and asks: Have you consulted with your conscience before God because of his promise of eternal life to those who seek it?

Nevertheless, “Christianity does not want to make changes in externals.” It does not want to decrease the erotic nature of the marital relationship. It does not want to change the friendly actions in a friendship. “[N]either does it want to abolish drives or inclination—it wants only to make infinity’s change in the inner being” of the individual human being. With this statement, we have Kierkegaard’s main point, that the only change Christianity calls for in a relationship between one person and another is the change that takes place in “the hidden being of inwardness, which is inwardly directed toward the God-relationship.”

Thus, Christianity “wants to transform all love into a matter of conscience.” It “must start from God and must find God in love to the neighbor. From this foundation, Christianity now takes possession of every expression of love.” The result is, for one thing, that “there is equality of all persons before God,” and Kierkegaard mentions the struggles of status and rights that women were experiencing within his own Danish society and that we recognize in our society today. In speaking about the wife, Kierkegaard says, “What abominations has the world not seen in the relationships between man and woman, that she, almost like an animal, was a disdained being in comparison with the man, a being of another species. What battles there have been to establish in a worldly way the woman in equal rights with the man—but Christianity makes only infinity’s change and therefore quietly. Outwardly the old more or less remains. The man is to be the woman’s master and she subservient to him; but inwardly everything is changed, changed by means of this little question to the woman, whether she has consulted with her conscience about having this man... Yet the conscience-question about the conscience-matter makes her in inwardness before God absolutely equal with the man.”

Whether or not we agree with the apostle Paul’s description in Ephesians 5 of the marital relationship to which Kierkegaard is referring, Kierkegaard is still offering a profound truth that applies to every human being in every relationship to all other human beings. This truth is the simple fact that God does not base a person’s worth and significance on his role in life. It is based upon the person’s existence as a moral creature before God. In other words, in God’s eyes, a king or president has no more worth or significance than a janitor. A rich man has no more worth before God than a poor man. As far as God is concerned, a man is no more significant than a woman. Everyone is equally worthwhile and significant to God. It is only we human beings who are more impressed with the great people of this world, who love to name drop, and who call famous actors and actresses “stars.” God is not impressed with external performance or popularity but only with the inward trust in him of the human heart, which, in fact, only he can see in secret anyway.

A remarkable result of the equality of persons is that “in loving the beloved we are first to love the neighbor.” It is easy to think that what holds a marriage together is the passion of love for the beloved, but Kierkegaard is suggesting that basing love on passion and feelings would be to invert Christianity. Instead, “[y]our wife must first and foremost be to you the neighbor,” which provides marriage with an “eternal foundation” on which the erotic element of marriage can be built. If there is no eternal foundation, neither love for the beloved nor love for the friend is true love.

Kierkegaard further contrasts the worldly and Christian perspectives on love with the lengthy and yet profound statements: “The merely human point of view conceives of love *either* solely in terms of immediacy [i.e., spontaneity, e.g., falling in love], as drives and inclination (erotic love), as inclination (friendship), as feeling and inclination, with one or another differentiating alloy of duty, natural relations, prescriptive rights, etc., *or* as something to be aspired to and attained because the understanding perceives that to be loved and favored, just like having persons one loves and favors, is an earthly good.



Christianity is not really concerned with all this, neither with...that sort of comfortableness.” First, as we have already seen, he is saying that the worldly perspective on love is based on feelings and passions. Nevertheless, it does also mix in certain moral obligations (even that of remaining faithful to one’s spouse), natural ties (such as those within a family between father and son or mother and daughter), and also certain universally recognized rights (such as the right to be treated with respect as a human being). However, according to Kierkegaard, these moral obligations are not sufficient to define love properly. Neither are the goals to be loved by another or to have someone to love, no matter how much we might long to find comfort in a relationship with someone whom we can call our beloved or friend. Indeed, loving people in order that we might be loved in return is just a natural part of the way we operate as human beings. While Christianity in no way denies the existence and validity of all these aspects of human relationships, Kierkegaard says that it does not base relationships on them. These relationships all require visible evidence in order to indicate their presence, but “God is not like a human being; it is not important for God to have visible evidence so that he can see if his cause has been victorious or not; he sees in secret just as well.” While the “worldly always needs decisions in the external sphere,” the “essentially Christian” first and foremost belongs to the “individual as the single individual” and secondly “belongs only to a person’s hidden inwardness,” in his conscience and spirit.

Kierkegaard directs our attention to the greatest example of individuality and inwardness, Jesus Christ himself. Here we have the “God-man,” i.e., the transcendent, creator God appearing in the created reality as a human being. What would we naturally expect him to look like? Someone who is clearly distinguished from all other human beings, because, after all, he is God in the flesh! But, instead, Kierkegaard emphasizes that Christ did not “show who he was by means, perhaps, of splendid processions” fit for a royal and indeed super-royal person. Rather, he took “the form of a lowly servant without ever being noticeable, so that he looked just like any other human being.” If you passed Jesus on the street in Jerusalem, you would never know that he was God incarnate and the Messiah. In addition, to add insult to injury so-to-speak, “in a worldly way [Christ] completely failed his task” of being accepted as the Messiah and King by the Jewish nation. Thus, even he, apart from the miracles he performed (but even the previous prophets of Israel had performed miracles) displayed his essence only inwardly.

Kierkegaard is saying: if this radical individuality and inwardness was true of Christ, then how much more his followers. Therefore, any attempts by Christians to show off their Christianity by external signs is not really Christianity. Kierkegaard mentions the example of monks living in a monastery as an outward means to indicate their devotion to God. We might also think of ministers who wear particular clothes, people who wear crosses, Christians who always need to tell others what they are “doing for God,” et al., where their intent is to demonstrate outwardly their Christianity. While we may think that we are being very noble and spiritual when we do such things, Kierkegaard says that these are merely “childishness.” If Christ hid himself from the world with his own “inwardness,” why do we Christians feel as though we need to make ourselves obvious to the world with our external signs? As Kierkegaard says, “We human beings, we take care to have sure and reliable signs by which love is known. But God and Christianity have no signs—is this not to have a great, indeed, the utmost confidence in human beings! When, in relationship to a human being, we [and God!] renounce the signs by which that person’s love is to be known, we [and God] are indeed saying that we are showing him boundless confidence, that we are willing to believe him despite all appearances. But why do you believe that God shows such a confidence? Is it not because he sees in secret? What earnestness!”

Indeed, it is the inwardness of Christianity that is the essential component of love. As a result, Kierkegaard states that “no human being has even seen Christian love, in the same sense that no one has ever seen *humanity*.” Humanity, as he is thinking of it, is not our outward appearance, because a corpse looks human. Yet, it is not a living human being. Therefore, *humanity* is inside the outer shells that we call our bodies. In addition, “Christianity has not changed anything in what people have previously learned about loving the beloveds, the friend, etc..” Loving the beloved still means to be loyal to that person so that no one else is a person’s beloved. Nevertheless, Christianity “has changed everything” by bringing in the “change of inwardness,” which is the “fundamental change..., thus making all love a matter of conscience.” The effect of this change could be the “cooling of passions” where a person gains a heightened awareness of the greater importance of “the [supernatural] inwardness of eternal life” in comparison to the natural emotional and physical attraction to the beloved. In other words, Christian love, with its desire for and expectation of eternity, always trumps the passion of erotic love for the beloved, because the former lasts eternally while the latter ends with one’s departure from the present realm.

Up to this point in the chapter, Kierkegaard has been focusing on the conscience as one aspect of love mentioned in 1 Timothy 1:5, “But the goal of our instruction is love, from a pure heart and a good conscience and the sincere faith.” He begins his conclusion to the chapter by considering the other two aspects of love in this verse, that it is “from a pure heart...and a sincere faith.” Thus he writes, “*Love is a matter of conscience and therefore must be out of a pure heart and out of a sincere faith...* Usually we say instead that a free heart is required for love or giving oneself in love... This heart, free as it is, will then find total freedom in giving itself away.” Just as the “bird is free only because you let it go,” so also, the heart finds its freedom in giving itself away to another.

However, Kierkegaard claims that such language is that of a poet, not a theologian. When theology considers love, it says that the heart is not free, but, instead, it is bound. It is “bound to God.” No person can speaking of being tied and bound to something or to someone to the same degree that a person with a pure heart is bound to God. A person can die and, therefore, be released from whatever or whomever he is bound. However, “God does not die, and the bond that binds is never broken”—for all of eternity.

“You who burn with the desire of erotic love or with the craving of friendship, please remember that what you say about freedom has never been denied by Christianity, but still there must be this infinite boundedness if the beloved’s heart and if your heart is to be pure. Therefore, first the infinite boundedness, and then the talk about freedom can being.” It is obvious to the Christian that “God has first priority, and everything, everything a person owns is pledged as collateral to this claim. If you remember this, then you can talk about the desire of freedom as much as you please.” It follows, then, “that if a pure heart is to be given away in erotic love the first consideration must be for your soul as well as for your beloved’s!”

Kierkegaard says that a “free heart has no history” until it gives itself away to the beloved or the friend. In contrast, “the heart bound infinitely to God has a prior history,” which began when the person “came into existence out of nothing.” It was then, and even before in eternity past, that God knew that an individual would bind his heart to him at some point in his journey through life in the present realm. In addition, “just as surely as you do not become nothing” in eternity, you go on into eternal life, if you have inwardly committed yourself to a pure heart that is bound to God. Therefore, your “eternal love-history...does not end at a grave.” Kierkegaard continues with one of his most poignant examples, “When the couch of death is prepared for you, when you go to bed never to get up again and they are only waiting for you to turn to the other side to

die, and the stillness grows around you—then when those close to you gradually leave and the stillness grows because only those closest to you remain, while death comes closer to you; then when those closest to you leave quietly and the stillness grows because only the most intimate ones remain; and then when the last one has bent over you for the last time and turns to the other side because you yourself are now turning to the side of death—there still remains one on that side, the last one by the deathbed, he who was the first, God, the living God—that is, if your heart was pure, which it became only by loving him.”

Obviously, this manner of speaking is different from that of “erotic love and earthly love.” More often than not, people consider the latter two as “the joy of life, so that the happy person truthfully says, ‘Now I am living for the first time,’ so it is the joy of life just to hear the lover talk about his happiness, about life, that is, its delight.” In contrast, “the one who has died [if he could talk] must talk about that conscientious love,” the love that comes from a pure heart and is bound to God. He “did not, note well, become bored with life but truly gained eternity’s life-joy. But it is the one who died who is speaking, and, alas, to many this seems so forbidding” to be listening to a dead person “that they dare not listen to his glad message.” Instead, “everyone gladly listens to the one about whom we say in a preeminent sense, ‘He lives,’” i.e., the one who has spoken so happily and warmly about loving his beloved. “Yet there must be one who has died,” because death itself is inevitable, and the moment people cheer the happy one with “Long live” erotic love and its resultant happiness, eternity and the one who has died say, “Die,’ that is, if your heart is to become pure. No doubt there has been someone who became happy, indescribably happy or unhappy, by loving a human being, but no person’s heart ever became pure unless it became that by loving God.”

Then, Kierkegaard turns his attention to the third aspect of love in 1 Timothy 1:5, a “*sincere faith*.” He comments that nothing is a more revolting combination than loving and falsehood. However, “to love falsely is to hate.” It is also true that “it is impossible to join the slightest lack of honesty with loving. As soon as there is any lack of honesty, there is also something concealed,” something that a person is afraid to reveal, even to his beloved. However, this kind of love is “selfish self-love,” and it “hides itself” precisely because it is unwilling to be completely open and honest, which means that the person “does not love. In honesty the lover presents himself before the beloved,” and, like a mirror, both lovers reflect “the genuine honesty” and “genuine faithfulness...in the mirror of honesty that erotic love holds between them.” Such honesty is between two human beings, but it is not the substance of the *sincere faith* of Christianity. The latter exists only if there is “honesty before God. If two people are to love each other in sincere faith, is it not simply necessary that honesty before God must be present in each individual?” Kierkegaard goes on to state that such honesty before God requires “that a person...know himself,” indeed, that he knows his moral condition before a morally perfect God and that he needs God’s eternal mercy and forgiveness. Of course, therefore, the “one who does not know himself” in such a way “cannot promise love out of a sincere faith,” since Christian faith longs for God’s grace and mercy.

Kierkegaard points out that the “concept of confidentiality involves a redoubling,” i.e., an intensification in the same direction in which the confidentiality takes place. His example is of a wife who communicates in confidence to her husband because this is her most intimate relationship. Kierkegaard calls us to “note that when the wife wishes to communicate to someone else her most intimate affair, the relationship with her husband, she herself perceives that there is only one to whom she can fully communicate this in confidence, and this one person is the same one to whom and with whom she has the relationship”—her husband. Thus, we see that the “concept of confidentiality” redoubles and intensifies towards the very person with whom one is most

intimate and most confidential. However, what if the wife wants to communicate to another person, perhaps her most intimate girlfriend, the fact that she is most confidential with her husband? Kierkegaard calls this communication “confidentiality about confidentiality.” The wife does not tell her friend everything that she confides in her husband. Yet, she confides in her friend that she confides most intimately and intensely in her husband. Thus, communication with her husband is “confidentiality,” while communication with her friend is “confidentiality about confidentiality.”

Then Kierkegaard asks, “With whom does a person have his most intimate relationship, with whom can one have the most intimate relationship? —is it not with God?” Thus, the relationship with God relativizes all confidential communication between human beings. The result is that confidentiality between human beings, even between husband and wife, is only “confidentiality about confidentiality,” because God knows more about a person than any other human being can. “Only God is [absolute] *confidentiality*, just as he is Love.” Kierkegaard perceptively asks, “If two people in honesty” during their wedding ceremony vow to remain faithful to one another throughout their lives, are they really vowing to remain faithful “to each other if they first, each one separately,” vow to remain faithful to another person, i.e., to God? Indeed, they are properly vowing to remain faithful to each other if they have *individually* vowed to remain faithful to God, because “this is necessary if in a Christian sense they are to love out of a sincere faith.” The next question follows along the same lines, “When two people completely confide in each other, is this completely confiding in each other if they first, each one separately, confide in a third person,” in God. “Yet this is necessary if they are to confide completely in each other, even if in each individual’s confidentiality with God there remains the inexpressible that is precisely the sign that the relationship with God is the most intimate, the most confidential.”

Such a statement by Kierkegaard reminds us of the apostle Paul’s teaching in Romans 8 that the Holy Spirit is actually interceding for us when all we can do is utter wordless groanings in the midst of encountering our weaknesses and sin (cf. Romans 8:26-27). God knows us most intimately, because he sees the secret places of our most inward being, our heart. In addition, our most intimate communication is with God. However, our awareness of our depraved moral condition can be so gut-wrenching that all we can do is groan. We are absolutely at a loss for words. Yet, God hears us and understands us, because such “wordless groanings” are the very “sign” of the Holy Spirit’s interceding for us. God is pushing us into our sin in order that we may appeal to him for mercy and forgiveness. His response is exactly what we need and what we ask for—even if we cannot put our request in actual words. God knows and recognizes what the Holy Spirit is doing as he looks straight into our hearts, our inwardness, and he responds to us accordingly—with mercy and forgiveness.

Kierkegaard continues, “How inviting...sounds the talk about confidentiality of two lovers with each other.” Each of us longs to be intimate with and confide in a another human being who is close and whom we trust. Yet, Kierkegaard points out that there is naturally “insincerity in this talk just as there is insincerity in this confidentiality.” The reason for the lack of sincerity is, as Kierkegaard mentioned above, because only “one who has died,” whom only God still knows and sees, can accurately and sincerely express himself about intimacy and confidentiality. In addition, when the “one who has died” speaks thus, it sounds as though he is urging that there be a “separation... between the two” lovers who are supposed to be the most intimate on a human level. Indeed, he is urging a kind of a separation, whereby each individual confides most intimately and separately from other human beings in the one who is pure *confidentiality*, God. Thus, “eternity’s confidentiality...is placed between” these two human beings. “Many, many times two people have become happy in the relationship of confidentiality

with each other, but never has anyone loved out of a sincere faith except through the separation's" proposing "confidentiality with God, which in turn is indeed God's assent to the lovers' confidentiality." In other words, confidentiality between two human beings, which is "confidentiality about confidentiality," is truly possible only when each human being first confides in God. Then, when each one has first confided in God, God sanctions and approves of their confidentiality with one another.

Therefore, in this chapter, love is first a matter of conscience. It is a matter of each individual's considering before God the moral nature of his love so that regardless of how wonderful his external actions are (and indeed Christianity is all for great "Works of Love")—whether giving a glass of water to a thirsty person, or tenderly loving the beloved, or warmly loving the friend—his love is foundationally *inward*, taking into account God's gracious promise of eternal life and being willing to have God be the only one who sees the genuineness of his inwardness in secret, whether he be rich or poor, of high position or low, handsome or plain, famous or obscure, educated or illiterate, known or unknown as a Christian. In addition, love is "out of a pure heart" that is bound eternally to God and "out of a sincere faith" that is most confidential with God.

## Chapter IV

### Our Duty to Love the People We See

In this chapter, Kierkegaard challenges the major excuse that we use for not loving other people—that we look at them, and we do not like what we “see.” We “see” others who are mean, who are of a different ethnic group, who are not of the same economic station as we are, who are of different skin color or a different religion or a different political party, or who do not love us, and, as a result, we do not love them. We think to ourselves, when they change, then we will love them.

In previous chapters, Kierkegaard has argued that our “neighbor,” whom we are called to love, is everyone. In the current chapter, his claim is the same, but he identifies the neighbor as the “person we see.” He begins by borrowing this language from 1 John 4:20, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for how can he who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, love God, whom he has not seen?”

While the apostle John is referring to loving one’s fellow Christian, Kierkegaard expands on this and speaks of loving one’s fellow human being. Is it legitimate for him to do so? Yes, but his argument follows a definite Kierkegaardian path. First, he comments that all human beings have a “need of love.” He illustrates this by referring to Genesis 2 where, after creating Adam, God says, “It is not good for [him] to be alone.” As a result, God creates Eve to meet Adam’s “innate need for companionship.”

Next, Kierkegaard cites Jesus Christ’s need of love, that “[h]e is indeed the God-man and thus eternally different from every human being, but still he was also a true human being, tested in everything human.” In other words, the transcendent Creator created a human facsimile of himself within the story of human history, and this God-man was truly human. Thus, “he could sympathize with people in this need to love and to be loved,” and he showed this need in John 21:15ff. when he asked Peter *three times* if he loved him. At first, Jesus’ questions seem like an “appalling contradiction that the one who is God loves humanly, since to love humanly is to love an individual human being and to wish to be that individual human being’s best beloved.” Jesus certainly did not ask Peter *three times* because he “felt the need to hear” his yes three times. Probably, it was for Peter’s sake, because he had previously denied Jesus three times in his darkest hour when he was on trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin.

Then, Kierkegaard digresses from the example of Jesus into a detailed discussion of the reasons why human beings avoid loving others, including those “whom [they] see.” In the first part of the discussion, he lists three “deceptions” that people use as excuses not to love others. Number one is “dejection.” People complain about how unhappy this world is. Therefore, they avoid loving others instead of facing into their own unhappiness, dealing with it, and thereby learning how to love in the midst of their unhappiness. Number two is “accusation.” People accuse others of not being worth loving instead of facing into their own unwillingness to love, accusing themselves of not being willing to love, and thereby learning how to get over their unwillingness. Number three is “proud self-satisfaction that considers it futile to seek what could be worthy of” themselves. People can always tell you what is wrong with others and, therefore, what makes it impossible to love them rather than facing into their own shortcomings, dealing with them, and thereby learning how to overcome their own weaknesses in order to love others properly.

“[T]he task,” Kierkegaard concludes, “is not to develop one’s fastidiousness [being picky about whom one is going to love] but to transform oneself and one’s tastes.” This is the key idea in this chapter. More often than not we want to change other people so that they become lovable, but Kierkegaard is suggesting that the person who really

needs to change is me. I need to become more loving even if those who seem impossible to love never change. Of course, this is easier said than done, but through this logic we arrive at Kierkegaard's extrapolation of the verse in 1 John that it is our "*duty to love the people we see.*"

The question arises, should we begin with loving people or loving God? "The matter is quite simple. A person should begin with loving the unseen, God, because then he himself will learn what it is to love. But that he actually loves the unseen will be known by his loving the brother he sees; the more he loves the unseen, the more he will love the people he sees." Here we find the germ of "the most dangerous of all" excuses for not loving people whom we see. It can feel so noble and pious to us that we would "love only the unseen," God. We do not have time to love people, because we are so busy loving and worshipping God—alone in our own little religious world, tucked far away from those bad people out there who are unworthy of our love and who might contaminate us and sully our love for God. However, this attitude is simply false piety. To cut ourselves off from the world is actually to cut ourselves off from God. For how can we love the one who is unseen if we do not love the one who can be seen within the same world that we inhabit?

Kierkegaard adds more terminology to his argument and sounds like a philosopher as well as a theologian. "[I]f a person is to fulfill the duty in loving to love the people he sees, then he must not only find among actual people those he loves, but he must root out all equivocation and fastidiousness in loving them so that in earnestness and truth he loves them as they are... By this we do not mean to recommend childish infatuation with the beloved's accidental characteristics, still less a misplaced sentimental indulgence. Far from it, the earnestness consists precisely in this, that the relationship itself will with integrated power fight against the imperfection, overcome the defect, and remove heterogeneity... It is not you who, on the grounds of the weakness of the [person you see], are to remove yourself, as it were, from him or make your relationship more distant; on the contrary, the two are to hold together all the more firmly and inwardly in order to remove the weakness. As soon as the relationship is made equivocal, you do not love the person you see... On the other hand, when the defect or the weakness makes the relationship more inward, not as if the defect should not become more entrenched but in order to conquer it, then you love the person you see."

Kierkegaard is saying that true, biblical love is deliberate and decisive and permits nothing to stand in its way of even loving the unlovable, least of all people with great deficiencies, even moral deficiencies, that make it hard if not impossible to love them. At the same time, true biblical love has as its goal to help others eliminate those things that they should, i.e., *moral* deficiencies, in order to improve their human behavior. In other words, Kierkegaard is not suggesting that we human beings *never* change so that we just love everyone as they are. There is one aspect of our human existence that *requires* change. We have a biblical obligation to change if we are following our own self-constructed definition of morality instead of God's. True love is aware of this and, as we will find out in a later chapter, seeks to gain the victory over immorality and help a person pursue biblical morality.

Finally, Kierkegaard returns to the story of Jesus Christ and the moment when he stood before the Jewish Sanhedrin and the Roman governor Pilate, accused of a crime that deserved capital punishment. One of his close friends, Peter, who had asserted that he would die for him, instead denied him three times. What was Jesus' response? Anger? Vengeance? Rejection? No, instead it was love. He looked at Peter "as when a mother sees a child in danger through its own carelessness, and now, since she cannot manage to grasp the child, she catches it with her admittedly reproachful but also saving look." Thus, according to Kierkegaard, "the Savior of the world always saw clearly where

the danger was, saw that it was Peter who was in danger, saw that it was Peter who should and must be saved. The Savior of the world did not make the mistake of seeing his cause as lost if Peter did not hasten to help him, but he saw Peter as lost if he did not hasten to save Peter.”

“Christ’s love for Peter was boundless in this way: in loving Peter he accomplished loving the person one sees. He did not say, ‘Peter must first change and become another person before I can love him again.’ No, he said exactly the opposite, ‘Peter is Peter, and I love him. My love, if anything, will help him to become another person.’ Therefore he did not break off the friendship in order perhaps to renew it if Peter would have become another person; no, he preserved the friendship unchanged and in that way helped Peter to become another person. Do you think that Peter would have been won again without Christ’s faithful friendship? But it is so easy to be a friend when this means nothing else than to” require something specific from the friend and, “if the friend does not respond” appropriately, then to let go of the friendship until the friend does choose to respond appropriately. “Is this a...friendship?” We say, “When he has changed, then perhaps he can become my friend again.”

But “Christ’s love was boundless.” Thus, the “Christian point of view...is that to love is to love precisely the person one sees. The emphasis is not on loving the perfections one sees in a person, but the emphasis is on loving the person one sees” while overlooking the perfections and imperfections, the strengths and weaknesses. “[W]e human beings speak about finding the perfect person in order to love him, whereas Christianity speaks about being the perfect person [or at least pursuing perfection] who boundlessly loves the person he sees” and “to love the person you see just as you see him,...with all his imperfections and weaknesses, to love him as you see him when he has changed completely, when he no longer loves you but perhaps turns away indifferent or turns away to love another, to love him as you see him when he betrays and denies you.”



## Chapter V

### Our Duty to Remain in Love's Debt to One Another

Kierkegaard begins this chapter by wondering how love feels. Certainly “love has been called a mood, a life, a passion.” Then he quotes Socrates from Plato’s *Symposium*, “Love is a son of wealth and poverty” and eventually states that love “can penetrate to the innermost being” and can make a person end up with nothing if he gives away everything out of love.

“Yet love is perhaps most correctly described as an infinite debt.” Kierkegaard derives this idea from Romans 13:8, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” Usually, we think that a person runs up a debt to someone who loves him. When parents love their child, we say that the child is now in debt to his parents for the love that they have given to him and can only pay them back with installments of his own love. However, according to Kierkegaard, the apostle Paul in this verse in Romans is stating the opposite—that it is the one who loves by continually giving love who “*runs into infinite debt.*” What a strange idea. It is like paying back a loan on my house or car, and the more money I pay, the more I owe on the loan—that the more love I give a person, the more love I owe him. Who thinks up these crazy ideas? The apostle Paul’s answer is God—because God thinks differently from our worldly way of thinking. Love is not meritorious. I cannot make people or God owe me love by my loving them. It is the opposite. The more I love God or my neighbor, the more I owe them love, not the more they owe me love. Thus, Christianity teaches that it is “*our duty to remain in love’s debt to one another.*”

Certainly nothing seems easier than remaining in debt. After all, if I go out and buy more items with my credit card, then the more I will owe the credit card company. How easy to remain in debt! Instead, for the responsible person, “the task is to get out of debt”—financial debt. However, with love, the opposite is true. Not just the “task” but indeed the “duty” and obligation is to *remain in debt, in infinite debt no less.* Then Kierkegaard ties the concept of love to “activity.” Once I owe money to the credit card company, I most easily remain in debt by doing nothing to pay my bill (although a compulsive shopper may believe that it is easier to go out and charge even more on his credit card!). However, once I am in debt to love, the irony is that I most easily remain in debt by doing everything in order to love even more, by actively loving others as much as possible.

What weird accounting is this thing called Christianity! Kierkegaard claims that it is because Christianity has “its own inner coherence;” it operates on the basis of its own logic, the logic of God’s grace “so that already a certain transformation of attitude and mind is necessary just to become aware of what the discourse is about.” Such awareness involves a change in categories of thought. Normally, we think in terms of merit—that if I work as an employee, my employer owes me a paycheck which I deserve. Until he pays me, he is in debt to me. However, if I switch to the category of grace, the more I work, the more I remain in debt. This, according to Kierkegaard, is what the apostle Paul means by “owe no one anything, except to love one another,” that, even after having done something extraordinarily loving, a person still must consider himself as remaining in infinite debt to the one whom he has loved. Thus, “an actual bookkeeping arrangement is inconceivable, is the greatest abomination to love,” because it refers only to a finite relationship, whereas true love always thinks in terms of the duty to remain in infinite debt in an infinite relationship with both God and neighbor.

This duty involves an “*eternal vigilance*” that can only admit that it never wants to dwell on what it has done to prove that it has loved. Instead, it understands that it has

never done enough, which is love's "infinite, inexhaustibility," and "immeasurability." On the one hand, the one who is loved would never think of being able to pay back the love that has been expressed towards him, because the one who is loved realizes that the least little love showed him is "infinitely more" than he deserves. On the other hand, the one who loves realizes that the least little love he does "is infinitely less" than the debt he owes. Here Kierkegaard draws a distinction between the "scholars" and the "philosophers." The "scholars" claim that they can calculate love and make a meritorious accounting of it, while the "philosophers" know that "the least little expression of love is infinitely greater than all sacrifices, and all sacrifices are infinitely less than the least little bit in part-payment on the debt." There is a play on words here, because "philosopher" literally means "lover of wisdom." Thus, the truly wise person not only loves in order to remain in infinite debt to another, but he also loves this weird accounting that the Bible assigns to its concept of love. More explicitly, he loves grace—God's grace whereby God grants him mercy and forgiveness without his earning it through even his great love for God and for his neighbor.

"*Eternal vigilance*" also means that love avoids any kind of comparison with itself or with others' love. To compare my love now with my love yesterday is to turn my relationships into finite ones where I am starting to make an accounting of my love. Yet, to love is always to remain in infinite debt, which makes comparing my love now with my love at any other time meaningless. Kierkegaard illustrates this point by referring to someone who demonstrates real enthusiasm, who "wills only one thing and enthusiastically wants to sacrifice everything for the good." He is the one who is most at risk to succumb to the "tempter" who would encourage him to "slow down, take it easy, enjoy life in comfort," precisely because, *in comparison to others*, he is doing so much. However, such a relaxed attitude would demonstrate that the person has given up holding to "infinity's requirement" that says that a person is never finished in loving properly, no matter how enthusiastic he is about loving. Do not flatter yourself or accept the world's admiration, Kierkegaard says, for your tremendous sacrifice of love. Instead, "remain in the debt of infinitude" and avoid at all costs comparing your love with your own or with anyone else's.

In addition, comparison results in an unfortunate loss. "What does comparison lose? It loses the moment, the moment that ought to be filled with an expression of love's life... A moment lost, then the chain of eternity is broken; a moment lost, then the connectedness of eternity is disturbed..." As usual, Kierkegaard is speaking of the ideal to highlight the fact that God calls us is to love him and others perfectly and without interruption, even the interruption of reflecting on how our love now compares with our love yesterday. Love's duty is simply to continue in love, because one's love is never enough. It is never enough to pay the infinite debt that one owes God for his mercy and his neighbor for being God's creation. Is Kierkegaard suggesting that we never even stop to reflect on what love means and the quality of our own love? Certainly not. He has written a book entitled *Works of Love*, and my version is 386 pages long! How can I read his book and thoughtfully reflect on what he is teaching about biblical love without interrupting my love towards others? Therefore, he must mean that we should never use our stopping to reflect on love as an excuse to avoid an opportunity to love someone else. As I discussed this very concept with some others, we imagined a person's walking by us and collapsing in pain and our saying to this poor soul, "We're sorry, but we can't help you right now, because we are discussing our duty to remain in love's infinite debt to you." How silly! Nevertheless, it is still a good thing for us to reflect, discuss, and help each other learn more about this all important concept of love within Christianity.

But ideally, if a person never stops to compare his love, then he also realizes that "*to remain in debt...is action; thus love, with the help of duty, continues Christianly in action,*

*in the momentum of action, and thereby in the infinite debt.*” As soon as I stop to compare my love, I also stop acting. That is, I stop performing the task of love and my duty to love. However, “Christianity, by virtue of its eternal nature and with the earnestness of eternity,” knows that love is never finished and therefore wants simply, truthfully, and enthusiastically to continue working at love while it remains in infinite debt, which is especially true if a person compares his love to God’s. Kierkegaard says that “now love has found its master,” the one who has called it to perform its duty. Therefore, the Christian always keeps God in mind when he is acting in love, because he realizes that God, not himself or the world, is the ultimate judge of his love—because “God is Love.” In this way, the Christian “remains in debt, and he also acknowledges that it is his duty to remain in debt...as a humble, loving soul.”

With this chapter, Kierkegaard finishes the *First Series* of “Some Christian Deliberations In The Form Of Discourses” where he has focused on the idea that love is a duty in the light of God as our creator and his promise of eternal life through his mercy. As he brings this first series to a close, he says that he feels compelled to describe the “essentially Christian” in contrast both to the world which wants nothing to do with Christianity and to the false Christianity of Denmark which he calls “Christendom.” Kierkegaard believes that Danish pastors are soft-pedaling the message of Christianity and hiding from people its true content in order to avoid the effect that it should have on them. The bottom line is that the “essentially Christian” is offensive to human beings. Therefore, the Christian will find himself at odds with both himself and the world, what Kierkegaard calls “the truly Christian struggle,” and it “always involves a double danger because there is a struggle in two places: first in the person’s inner being, where he must struggle with himself, and then, when he makes progress in this struggle, outside the person with the world.” Kierkegaard rightly points out that we all naturally shy away from conflict and therefore are tempted to change the message of the Bible and make it more attractive to ourselves and other people. He believes that the Danish Christian community of his day is doing just exactly this.

The first struggle, the inner one, occurs because a person considers God’s requirements—for example, to deny himself and love his neighbor—and realizes that he cannot fulfill these requirements perfectly. This would be ok if God were just to cut us all some slack, because at least we are trying to be good. Yet, Kierkegaard says that the biblical message indicates that our lack of moral perfection places us under eternal condemnation from God, and we can escape only by humbling ourselves before God and appealing to him for mercy. However, our pride resists this message, and we would rather hear that our human attempts at goodness have earned God’s love. Kierkegaard realizes that we will somehow have to overcome our inner natural resistance if we are going to embrace the message of God’s eternal condemnation and humbly seek his mercy. He has already pointed out in this chapter that such humility requires thinking of our relationship to God with the logic of grace. Only God’s loving initiative causes a human being to overcome his natural resistance to this message. Thus, there is always this first struggle and the danger of not overcoming it just to become a Christian.

The language that Kierkegaard uses to describe our legal standing before God is even stronger than what I have used. He says that we are under “eternal damnation,” words we usually associate with the hell-fire and brimstone preachers we have either seen in movies or experienced ourselves; but Kierkegaard wrote in his journals that the only appropriate way to communicate the message of Christianity was with “gentleness and rigorousness” (*JP VI* 6748). While the church in Denmark was certainly gentle, it lacked rigorousness. Danish preachers were more concerned about entertaining people and filling their churches than about being honest with them in regard to their moral and spiritual condition and its eternal ramifications. Different from the Danish church, there

have also been those preachers, the hell-fire and brimstone type, who are certainly rigorous, but they lack gentleness. As a psychologist once mused, perhaps these Bible teachers are expressing more their anger towards their own fathers who did not love them properly than they are God's love and his willingness to be merciful to us who do not deserve his mercy. In other words, Kierkegaard would say that rigorousness without humility and gentleness is just as unchristian as gentleness without rigorousness and boldness.

In addition, Kierkegaard never claimed to have any authority that should make people think that they ought to listen to him. He wrote in his journals that he was only a "poet," a thinker, and "without authority." He said, "I am no apostle or the like; I am a poetic-dialectical genius, personally and religiously a penitent" (*JP VI* 6317). We hear the irony. This was his way of saying that no Christian after the apostles ought to exercise authority over any other Christian. We have seen that Kierkegaard explicitly made this point in Chapter IIIA "Love is the Fulfilling of the Law" that certainly we should be in dialogue with other human beings about the Christian message, but our only authority is the Bible, not the pastors, elders, et al. of our churches and denominations. When church leaders misunderstand their role, they make the same mistake that the Pharisees did whom Jesus accused of having "seated themselves in the chair of Moses" (Matthew 23:2). Church leaders likewise erroneously seat themselves in the chairs of Jesus and the apostles. Instead, when church leaders correctly understand their role, they permit people to retain their individuality before God and their individual responsibility to stand alone before him on the basis of their own wrestling with the biblical message. Kierkegaard liked to describe this as keeping ourselves in a position of "indirect communication" with people. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he cites the Greek philosopher Socrates as a good example of such indirect communication. Socrates was glad that he was ugly so that he would naturally repel his listeners away from him and thereby cause them to make their ideas their own.

The second struggle of the "essentially Christian," the outer one, occurs when a Christian shares the biblical message with the world and finds that the world considers these ideas to be "ludicrous" and crazy, even as the Christian seeks to love his neighbor. Therefore, the world with its different values and goals will oppose the Christian and his message. Kierkegaard realizes that our natural tendency will be to soften God's message, because people will certainly tire of hearing it and probably stop coming to church, which will threaten the very livelihood of pastors so that even they will oppose the "essentially Christian" by adopting a worldly approach to Christianity. Kierkegaard believes that the church in Denmark, "Christendom", had changed the biblical message into a kind of candy that made it attractive to its worldly audience. This candy made it sound as though we really are not as bad as the Bible says and, in fact, that we can become good people just by pursuing good, moral actions. Therefore, we can pay the debt that we owe love, thus making ourselves worthy of God's mercy and forgiveness. The Danish church also communicated that Christianity's benefits are more temporal than eternal—that God will bless people and their country with honor, esteem, wealth and health in the present realm because of their faith and obedience to him.

Kierkegaard describes the conflict between the world and Christianity in terms of the difference between the "*merely human idea of self-denial*" and the "*Christian idea of self-denial*." The human idea is this: to give up your selfish desires and to love others—in order that you might be honored, esteemed, and considered by people as godly and wise. If politicians, businessmen, athletes, and professors receive honor and, in some cases, extravagant payment, from the world for their efforts in this life, then should not those who love and sacrifice themselves for the sake of others receive the same? In

addition, why give up something in this world unless there is also a great reward *in this world*? Our minds just naturally think this way.

In contrast, the Christian idea of self-denial is this: to give up your selfish desires and to love others—in order to be criticized and mocked by the world because it considers the whole idea of God's judgment along with eternal condemnation and eternal life to be ludicrous and crazy. The world wants only a God of love, not a God of judgment. It wants only a God who applauds our efforts to deny ourselves and love others and then rewards us with a good life now, because we have made ourselves worthy of it. Yes, we maybe have made ourselves worthy even eternal life later, but what really matters is this life now. Who really wants a God who applauds Christians' efforts to love others but still considers their efforts to be less than worthy of his rewarding them because they always remain in infinite debt to his love, thus requiring that he grant them eternal life merely on the basis of his mercy and grace?

Therefore, the second struggle is whether or not a person is willing to interface with a world that, instead of praising the Christian who is seeking to love his neighbor with eternity and God's grace in mind, rejects him even to the extent of "executing him as a criminal" (a reference to Christ's own death on the cross). Kierkegaard is again speaking of the ideal. Certainly not every person who is uninterested in Christianity will dedicate his life to persecuting and killing Christians. But Kierkegaard is saying that the world definitely sees things differently, and, for those of us who need people's approval to feel good about ourselves, the world is going to be a difficult place to live as a Christian. The world will never approve of *biblical* Christianity, which may result in even physical harm to Christians. The world asks why the Christian wants to do what is right "out of fear of someone invisible," i.e., God, and for the sake of eternity? Fear of the invisible God just does not make any sense to those who want their reward now, even for their Christianity. This is the second struggle and the danger of continually not overcoming it except by God's grace.

## Second Series

### Chapter I

#### Love Builds Up

Philosophers love to debate the topic of human language. Just what is language? When I say, “That person is a rock,” what exactly do I mean? That he is made of such hard substance that it would require a sledgehammer to destroy him, or that he is someone we can count on in an crisis to remain cool and calm and lead us out of the crisis? More than likely I mean the latter, but how would someone listening to me really know?

Language can be one of three kinds—univocal, equivocal, and analogical. A word such as “rock” is *univocal* if it has one and only one meaning. For example, if it means only that something is made of a material hard substance, then to say that a person is a rock is to imply that he is of the sledgehammer kind. The word “rock” is *equivocal* if its meaning is open to one or more interpretations. In this case, it could mean being made of a material hard substance or it could mean staying cool and calm in a crisis. Plus, the word “rock” is *analogical* if it conjures up one idea in a person’s mind but refers to another idea instead that is similar and can easily be compared to the first. For example, if it conjures up the idea of a material hard substance but actually refers to staying cool and calm in a crisis, then the word is being used not only analogically but also *metaphorically*.

Kierkegaard begins this chapter by claiming that “[a]ll human speech, even the divine speech of Holy Scripture, *about the spiritual* is essentially metaphorical speech” (emphasis mine). The reason is that human beings go through a transition in their lives from thinking strictly in terms of the “sensate-psychical” to the “spiritual.” The former is when language is used more univocally and equivocally, because the human being is thinking only of life *in the present realm*. The latter is when the human being grows up, so to speak, and learns that there is another realm to take into account, i.e., *the eternal and spiritual realm*. The former, the sensate-psychical, is language used strictly on the basis of responding to our human senses so that we speak of what we can see, smell, feel, and hear. The latter, the spiritual, is language used when we realize that there is someone beyond the material world, God, whom we cannot *immediately* sense and yet who has created the sensate world. Thus, we move beyond the “visible” to the “invisible” and must speak about God and our relationship with him, which is “invisible,” using words that we normally use to refer only to the “visible.” In other words, we use earthly words in the context of metaphorical language and meaning.

Then Kierkegaard begins his discussion of a portion of 1 Corinthians 8:1, “Love builds up.” He writes, “One of the metaphorical expressions that Holy Scripture frequently uses, or one of the phrases that Holy Scripture frequently uses metaphorically, is: ‘to build up.’” First, Kierkegaard comments that it is interesting that the Christian scriptures do not tire of this phrase. Instead, they use it over and over in order to point to the importance of its inwardness in the Christian, which has been a key idea all along in *Works of Love*—that outward action is biblical only when it is based upon inward commitment to God and the eternal.

Second, Kierkegaard asks, what exactly does “build up” mean? “[I]n ordinary speech” it means “to erect something *from the ground up*.” For example, when someone “is adding a wing on his house we do not say that he is building up a wing but that he is building *on*.” Therefore, since the phrase “*from the ground up*” is involved in the

meaning, the direction of the building is definitely upward, “but only when the height inversely is depth.” What does Kierkegaard mean by this? He refers to Jesus’ statement in Luke 6:48 regarding the “person who built a house and ‘dug deep.’” In other words, “when it comes to building up, the point is to build a foundation.” To build without a foundation is “building in the air.” The key word obviously is “foundation.” To build is one thing. To build up, i.e., on a deeply dug and firm foundation, is a whole another thing.

When it comes to human actions, “to build up’ is exclusively characteristic of love,” and it always involves one person’s actions in relation to another person. “[W]hen we see a solitary person” doing well with little means, “we are cheered,...but we do not actually say that it is an upbuilding sight.” Yet, when “a housewife, one who has many to care for,” does well with a little so that she cares well for her whole household, “we say that this is an upbuilding sight.” In addition, “[w]hen we see a large family packed into a small apartment,” but they are treating each other well, “we say that it is an upbuilding sight because we see the love that must be in each and every individual” as they *relate to one another*.

“Wherever upbuilding is, there is love, and wherever love is, there is upbuilding.” The things of the current world are not upbuilding in and of themselves. It is only when they are used by someone who is loving that they become such. Therefore, a “discourse about what can be upbuilding would...be the most interminable discourse of all discourses,” because everything can be upbuilding when it is used with love. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard laments that “it is very rare to see or hear anything upbuilding.”

Going back to the idea that building up involves the ground and foundation, “what, in the spiritual sense is the ground and foundation of the spiritual life?” It can be only love itself. “Love is the source of everything and, in the spiritual sense, love is the deepest ground of the spiritual life. In every human being in whom there is love, the foundation, in the spiritual sense, is laid. And the building that, in the spiritual sense, is to be erected is again love, and it is love that builds up. Love builds up, and this means that it builds up love. In this way the task is circumscribed.” To put it another way, love builds on the foundation of love, and what it builds is love. The builder is love and the building love builds is love—from the foundation to the rest of the building.

The upshot is that whenever a person conveys “knowledge” or “insight” or wisdom to another person, even with a degree of “expertness” and “integrity,” if what they are doing “does not build up love,” it is not “upbuilding in the deepest sense,” because their learner’s knowledge, etc. is not being erected “*from the ground up*.” Regardless of what love is using at the moment, i.e., knowledge, wisdom, food, money, etc., if it is not building up love with the particular tool of love, it is not true biblical love.

If love is going to build up love “*from the ground [foundation] up*,” then Kierkegaard concludes that “love builds up by presupposing that love is present” in the other person. His argument goes like this—if love is upbuilding, then “*either* this must mean that the one who loves implants love in another person’s heart, *or* it must mean that the one who loves presupposes that love is in the other person’s heart, and by this very presupposition he builds up love in him—from the ground up.” In other words, the proper use or goal of love is to build up love in the other person. Such is the building that love builds—love in its fellow human beings.

However, the question is: can a human being implant love in another human being’s heart? No, only God can do this. “It is God, the Creator, who must implant love in each human being, he who himself is Love.” Since God is the very definition of love because he grants mercy to us who do not deserve it, then Kierkegaard is saying that of course God is the only one who can cause a human being to love properly, that is, biblically. Therefore, it is particularly arrogant if a human being thinks that, even by loving another

person, he can “control” and transform that person and cause him to be loving in return. “Only the unloving person fancies that he should build up by controlling the other.” Instead, “the one who loves presupposes continually that love is present and in just that way he builds up.”

However, what if God has not yet implanted true biblical love in a person? It does not matter. Kierkegaard indicates that the *potential* for love is always there in the other person, and, even though what God does is out of our control completely, we must still presuppose that love is present, in fact, present in the ground and foundation of that person. It is God’s decision how he controls human beings and implants true love in them. It is our decision that we choose to presuppose love in others. Thus, “the one who loves works very quietly and very solemnly” while he knows that “the forces of eternity [i.e., God] are in motion. Love humbly makes itself inconspicuous just when it is working the hardest—indeed, its work seems as if it did nothing at all.”

“Alas, to busyness and worldliness this is the greatest foolishness: that in a certain sense doing nothing at all should be the most difficult work. Yet this is the case... [I]t is truly most difficult of all to build up with the presupposition that love is present and to end with the same presupposition.” Why? Because we all are basically control freaks. We want ever so much to control other people *by making them love us*. Yet, if we are going to presuppose love in the other person, because we are leaving it up to God as to whether or not he implants love in him, then we love “humbly” and “make [ourselves] inconspicuous.” We love and stand off to the side to see what *God* is going to do.

This is why Kierkegaard “can compare this upbuilding of love...with the secret working of nature.” While people are sleeping, nature, out of their control, is still at work. It never stops. “Love acts in the same way; it presupposes that love [i.e., God] is present, like the germ in the grain of wheat, and if it succeeds in bringing it to fruition, love conceals itself just as it was concealed while it worked early and late.” In other words, the upbuilding of love is willing for love to remain secret and inconspicuous, because it realizes that God is invisibly working in people when and how he wants, even creating true biblical love in them whenever he desires. Thus, in the final analysis, the one who loves does not do something *to others*. He really “does something to himself—he presupposes that love is [potentially] present in the other person—which certainly is the opposite of doing something to the other person” since only God can implant love in him. We would all like to be able to tear down hate and build up love in other people, and we devise methods whereby we believe we will accomplish just such human reconstruction. “But in the well-intentioned zeal to tear down and to build up we forget that ultimately no human being is capable of laying the ground of love in the other person.” Only God can do this.

“Right here we see how difficult is the art of building” up that is described by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, a passage that we hear at just about every Christian wedding. Kierkegaard considers the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 as providing “more precise specifications of how love acts in building up.” The first part of this description is that “*Love is patient*.” Patience, after all, is “simply perseverance in presupposing that love is indeed present” in the foundation of the person being loved. Then “*it is not jealous*” or “*resentful*” because jealousy and resentment would deny love in the other person and thereby lay waste, if it were possible, the foundation. But love, which builds up, bears the other person’s misunderstanding, his ingratitude, his anger.” The reason is that the person who loves “bears the burdens” of others, even their burdens of misunderstanding, ungratefulness, and anger in the hope that God will implant true love in them. The jealous and resentful person cannot bear these burdens—in love. He must try to tear them down in order to build up love, but tearing down is not our job. It is only God’s who tears down by building up.



*“Love does not seek its own”*—that is, it does not push everything else aside in order to make room for only the fulfillment of its own desires. It allows everything to remain as it is by presupposing love in the other person, or at least the possibility of God’s implanting biblical love where it is currently absent.

*“It does not rejoice at wrong”*—that is, instead of rejoicing when other people do what is wrong, get caught, and get torn down publicly by the media and their readers and listeners, the truly loving person “rejoices in presupposing that love is present in the ground.” Therefore, love builds up and hopes for goodness to manifest itself by the grace of God even in the person who has committed such egregious wrong, perhaps harming others in a most hurtful way.

*“Love bears all things.”* Kierkegaard likens this to a healthy person who is able to draw nourishment from even unhealthy foods. “This is how love bears all things, by continually presupposing that love is at least present in the ground,” that an unloving person is always a potentially loving person by the miracle of God’s grace just as unhealthy food is always potentially healthy by the miracle of God’s power. God could transform a donut into a nice healthy vegetable dish if he so chooses.

*“Love believes all things,”* that even the most misguided, corrupted, and hateful person could become truly loving—if God were to implant love in him. Therefore, “[/]love hopes all things,” that just as the father of the prodigal son never lost hope in his son’s returning and he never thought to respond to his son except with its being clear that, as far as he was concerned, there had been no break in their relationship, so also the truly loving person loves the erring, the misguided, even the lost. Thus, the prodigal son perceived through his father’s unhesitating forgiveness that he was loved and that “there had been no break.”

*“Love endures all things... When we say that a mother puts up with her child’s naughtiness, are we saying that as a woman she is patiently suffering evil? No, we are saying something else, that as a mother she is continually remembering that this is a child and thus is continually presupposing that the child still loves her and that this will surely show itself. Otherwise we would talk about how patience endures all things, not about how love endures all things.”* Thus, love quietly presupposes that love is still present in the other person, or at least will appear if God so chooses it to do so. Love also is *“not arrogant, it is not impetuous, it is not irritable.”* It is not arrogant in the sense that it does not believe that it can “create love in the other person.” Neither does it think that it must tear down someone’s negative qualities before it will build him up again by loving him. Instead, it humbly, carefully, and thoughtfully loves in as easygoing a manner as possible without thinking that it needs to change anything in the other person. “Therefore whatever may have happened to you, something so embittering that you could wish to have never been born and to become silent in death, the sooner the better—just bear in mind how love builds up and you will again be built up.” In this way, we convey to other people, even those who have hurt us deeply and permanently, the same mercy that God has granted us.

If love presupposes love, then it is different from wisdom, power, talent, and knowledge. Kierkegaard calls wisdom a “being-for-itself quality.” In other words, “[t]o be wise does not mean to presuppose that others are wise; on the contrary, it may be very wise and true if the truly wise person assumes that far from all people are wise.” Thus, it is in no way wrong to assume that all other people are unwise. The same is true of power, talent, and knowledge, that it is appropriate to assume that others are not powerful, are not talented, and are not knowledgeable. “Wisdom is a being-for-itself quality; power, talent, knowledge, etc. are likewise being-for-itself qualities.” But not so with love. “Love is not a being-for-itself quality but a quality by which or in which you are for others.” Love, if it is true biblical love, must always assume that others are loving,

even if they currently are not. For they could be if God were to implant love in them. This is the difference with love, that “to be loving is to assume, to presuppose, that other people are loving.”

“So, then, the deliberation goes back to the beginning. To build up is to presuppose love; to be loving is to presuppose love; only love builds up. To build up is to erect something from the ground up—but spiritually, love is the ground of everything. No human being can place the ground of love in another person’s heart; yet love is the ground, and we can build up only by presupposing love. Take away love—then there is no one who builds up and no one who is built up.”

## Chapter II

### Love Believes All Things—and Yet Is Never Deceived

At first glance, the title of this chapter contains a contradiction. If a person believes all things by believing everything he hears, then eventually he will believe something that is false and will therefore be deceived. If he hears that  $2+2=4$  and believes it, then he believes what is true and is not misled. If he then hears that  $2+2=10$  and believes it, then he believes what is false and has somehow been fooled. So the question arises, how can a person believe everything he hears and yet never be deceived? Kierkegaard explores the answer in this chapter, extracting the statement “love believes all things” from the apostle Paul’s letter, 1 Corinthians, and verse 7, that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Kierkegaard is apparently of the opinion that Paul means that love truly believes *all things* but without the person’s being fooled into believing what is false. Or is he? We will see.

This chapter is incredibly dense and absolutely busting at the seams. Kierkegaard has packed into it a full complement of ideas so that we can divide the chapter into three sections:

1. Introduction
2. Explanation of the first part of the title—*Love Believes All Things*
3. Explanation of the second part of the title—*and Yet is Never Deceived*

#### Introduction

Kierkegaard quotes the last verse of 1 Corinthians 13, “So faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest among these is love.” Since love is “the greatest,” it is “able to take upon itself the function of the” others which are “subordinate.” In other words, “the greatest must be able to do what the lesser are able to do.” It must be able to have faith and to hope, which, in turn, makes love “even more perfect.” Kierkegaard says that, as we consider the point of this chapter, we should keep in mind that *Love believes all things—and yet is never deceived*.

He tells us that he is going to discuss the title in two parts. First, he will explore what it means for love to “believe all things.” Then, he will explain the rather enigmatic concept that “the one who loves, just by believing everything, can be *secured against every deception*” (emphasis mine). Before he dives into the first part, Kierkegaard says that “not everyone who believes all things is therefore one who loves.” We might think that the right way to find a person who demonstrates divine, biblical love is to search for those who “believe all things.” However, Kierkegaard points out that love must come first, before belief, in order for belief to be “secured against every deception.” Here he is playing with words. If a person “believes all things” but lacks true love, then he really is being deceived somehow, but, if a person chooses to be a loving person, then his “believing all things” will result in his never being deceived. Or will it? Again, we will see how this works out in the rest of the chapter.

In addition, Kierkegaard wants to make sure that the reader knows that love’s “believing all things” presents a person with “a task” to perform. In other words, his belief is not passive. It is definitely active, even active to the point that he performs concrete tasks in his expressing his love towards other people. Kierkegaard comments that this is why it is appropriate to talk about the concept of love’s believing all things “in a book about the *works* of love.”

#### Explanation of the first part of the title—*Love Believes All Things*

Kierkegaard's goal in this first section is for the reader to understand the difference between "love" and "mistrust." It seems simple. On the one hand, love "believes all things." On the other hand, mistrust "believes nothing at all." But what do these contrasting statements mean, and what is the significance of their differences? Kierkegaard points out that a person who is characterized by "[l]ight-mindedness, inexperience, and naiveté" can tend to believe everything he hears. He believes all things. So can the person who is vain and conceited when others flatter him. He believes all things. So can the person who is envious, malicious, and corrupt tend to believe everything evil that he hears. He believes all things by turning everything he hears into something evil. Certainly love is not the same as light-mindedness, vanity, envy, corruption, etc. Therefore, if love basically does the same thing, i.e., "believes all things," how is it different from these other characteristics? Later, Kierkegaard will say that "when love believes everything, it is by no means in the same sense as light-mindedness, inexperience, and naiveté, which believe everything on the basis of ignorance and inexperience... [L]ight-mindedness, inexperience, and naiveté believe all things" simply as a useless mental process while "*lovingly to believe* all things is a choice on the basis of love." Light-mindedness, etc. believe everything unwisely. Love believes everything wisely.

Then, there is the person who is characterized by mistrust upon whom Kierkegaard will focus for the rest of the chapter. While a light-minded or evil person will believe at least something even if he should not, the one who mistrusts is suspicious of all that he hears and, therefore, believes nothing at all. This is clearly the opposite of love, which "believes all things." However, Kierkegaard will use the mistrustful person who believes nothing at all to explain just exactly what he thinks the apostle Paul means by love's believing all things. He states that there is something he calls "mistrust's shrewd secret." And what is this? "It is a misuse of knowledge." Mistrust erroneously claims that the same knowledge will lead everyone to the same conclusion, to not believing anything at all. Why? Because "[d]eception extends unconditionally just as far as truth...; there is no unconditional mark of truth or of honesty." In other words, there is nothing external about true love that marks it as obviously being true love. In the same way, there is nothing external about deception that marks it as obviously being deception. If a deceitful person says, "I love you," his deceit can come across exactly in the same way as the truly loving person—all nice and sweet and "genuine." Thus, "deception [possibly] extends...just as far as truth" into a person's being nice and sweet and "genuine." Therefore, mistrust concludes it is better not to believe anything at all and thereby avoid being fooled by any possible deceivers—always. But does complete skepticism really safeguard a person from being deceived? It seems to make sense that mistrust and its correlative, believing nothing at all, will never lead to a person's being deceived. Yet, Kierkegaard will show that the skeptic is the person who is most deceived, especially because he is deceiving himself!

In addition, Kierkegaard says that to treat knowledge like this, believing that it always leads a person to conclude that he is possibly being deceived, is to misunderstand the very concept of knowledge. Knowledge is a neutral commodity. It does not *cause* a person to draw a conclusion. It simply presents him with data from which he now has a "choice" in how he is going to handle the data. Is the person going to believe the data as true or false. In addition, the more important choice is: will he love and believe all things, or will he mistrust and believe nothing at all? Kierkegaard describes this as knowledge's having "placed the opposite possibilities in equilibrium." A person can either love or mistrust *regardless of whether or not the data are true*, i.e., whether or not he is being deceived. However, to say that deception is a possibility so that a person must believe nothing at all in order not to be deceived is to miss the whole point of the statement,

“love believes all things.” In addition, to believe nothing in order avoid being deceived by falsehood is to miss out on doing love. Just as there is a possibility of truth, there is also a possibility of love—even in the face of deception. Therefore, the possibility of love means that there is no necessity in always choosing to be mistrustful—just to avoid being deceived. In fact, if a person truly wants to be loving, then he must “believe all things” at all times. While this sounds a bit ludicrous, we should finish listening to the rest of Kierkegaard’s argument before we discard it.

He continues. Existence in the present realm as a human being tests you and reveals what kind of person you are—someone who loves or someone who mistrusts. Indeed, existence tests “*your* love, or whether there is love in you.” Every situation you encounter “confronts you” with either truth or deception. This is a given. And both of these are what Kierkegaard calls “in the equilibrium of opposite possibilities.” Truth and deception along with the responses of love and mistrust are equally possible in any particular situation. Imagine that you have knowledge of a situation and that other people have the same knowledge. It is equally possible that your knowledge could lead you either to choose to love and believe what you know as true so that you are actually deceived *because you are being told a lie*, or to choose to mistrust and believe nothing at all so that you still are actually deceived *because you are being told the truth*. As contradictory as it sounds, the former, to love and believe all things while being deceived, is what Kierkegaard means by *never being deceived*. He will make this clearer before he finishes the chapter.

Part of Kierkegaard’s point is, in true existentialist fashion, that it is *your* choice how you are going to respond. And *your* choice will then reveal if you are characterized by love or if you are characterized by mistrust. If the former, then you “believe all things” according to the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:7. If the latter, then you “believe nothing at all.” In Kierkegaard’s words, “When deception and truth are then placed in the equilibrium of opposite possibilities, the decision is whether there is mistrust or love in you.”

Still, someone may say, “Even what appears to be the purest feeling [in another person] could still be a deception.” Yes, this is always a possibility, but the one who mistrusts then chooses not to believe that the feeling really is pure and chooses “to believe nothing.” Thus, he reveals his mistrust. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard is quick to point out that the reverse of this example is also true. Someone may say, “Even what appears to be the vilest behavior could be pure love.” Yes, this is possible too, and the person who loves then chooses to believe that this behavior is love and chooses “to believe all things.” Thus, he reveals his love. In the first case, a person thinks that he has demonstrated “on the possibility of deception that one should not believe anything at all.” In the second case, Kierkegaard is claiming that he, *also on the possibility of deception*, “can demonstrate that one should believe everything. If someone thinks that one should not believe even the best of persons, because it is still possible that he is a deceiver, then the reverse also holds true, that you can credit even the worst person with the good, because it is still possible that his badness is an appearance.” Here we see Kierkegaard playing the master logician that he was.

He then proceeds into a more detailed explanation of this point. He states the fact that outside appearances may be completely different from inside reality. Some people, out of fear or modesty, hide from others what is actually going on inside them, which means “that the most indisputable thing [that one thinks is true about another person] could still have a completely different explanation.” Kierkegaard asks, “Is it not so that the one person never completely understands the other?” Even two people who have been married for sixty years would answer yes. His conclusion is that “all calm and, in the intellectual sense, dispassionate observers, who eminently know how to delve

searchingly and penetratingly into the inner being...judge with such infinite caution or refrain from it entirely... Only superficial, impetuous, passionate people, who do not know themselves and for that reason naturally are unaware that they do not know others, judge” hastily and without careful consideration.

Kierkegaard illustrates such impetuosity with the difference between an “inexperienced youth, who may never have sat on a horse before,” and “promptly leaps on the first horse that comes along,” and “the tough and yet very practiced riding master” who carefully examines the unknown horse before he rides it. “The inexperienced person” claims that “one horse is like another,” and, therefore, he knows them all; but the “riding master” has learned that there can be a “great difference” between horses. Thus, he is not quick to judge like either the “inexperienced youth” or the “mistrustful person.” If there can be a “great difference” between horses, says Kierkegaard, then how much more between human beings? In fact, he goes on to say that what makes us superior to animals is not only that we are made in the image of God and, therefore, are rational and moral beings, what he calls “the universally human,” but also that “each individual [human being] is...essentially different.” Animals operate on the basis of instinct. Human beings operate on the basis of rational, moral choice, and, yet, just as instinctual animals are each different, so much more different are rational, moral human beings.

Then, Kierkegaard explains this point about human beings in two long sentences that are worth quoting in their entirety. “Indeed, if it were not so that one human being, honest, upright, respectable, God-fearing, can under the same circumstances do the very opposite of what another human being does who is also honest, upright, respectable, God-fearing, then the God-relationship would not essentially exist, would not exist in its deepest meaning. If we were able with unconditioned truth to judge every human being according to a universally given criterion, then the God-relationship would be essentially abolished, then everything would be oriented exteriorly and find its completion paganly in political and social life, then living would become too easy but also exceedingly empty, then the effort as well as the self-deepening that develop the God-relationship in a human being in the most difficult collision of infinite misunderstanding would be neither possible nor necessary, and yet precisely in the most difficult collision of infinite misunderstanding the God-relationship develops in a person.”

That was a mouthful. In past chapters, Kierkegaard has explained that we are all rational, moral beings and that a universal moral criterion is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” However, we must never conclude, even by this biblical commandment, that we should love all human beings or be compelled to love all human beings in exactly the same way. Therefore, the manner in which you love your neighbor, who happens to be my neighbor too, may be completely different from the way I love him. To deny each of us the right to love the same person differently or even to lessen the necessity of figuring out how to love each person is to refuse to accept the existence of our God-given individuality, our individual responsibility before God, and the importance of our own choices apart from each other and the crowd—for the sake of eternity. When a human authority compels everyone to act, speak, or live exactly the same way, it places us in a social, religious, and political setting that denies or fails to promote adequately the responsibility of each of us to choose how we will love “our neighbor.” For example, when a human authority imposes a tax on everyone in order to give their money to the poor in the name of charity or welfare, it compels them to love others in exactly the same way on the basis of strictly an external standard, e.g., the “poverty level.” For an authority to command me not to steal another individual’s property or risk social justice and punishment is one thing. For them to force me to give my property to individuals in the name of charity or welfare is a whole other thing. In fact, the latter edges toward tyranny and totalitarianism which “abolish[es] the God-relationship.”

To compel each of us to love the same person in exactly the same manner empties an individual's relationship with God of its real substance, the eternal necessity of colliding with God in his assessment of him. God says that I am a sinner who needs his unmerited mercy. I typically and wrongly say one of three things—either that I do not care, or that I am not a sinner, or that I am a sinner who can earn God's mercy. The proper response is to agree with God and appeal to him for his eternal and unmerited mercy. Nevertheless, I must have this conversation with God alone and genuinely wrestle both with the difference between how God assesses me and how I naturally assess myself. I must also wrestle with how I am going to respond as an individual to God and my neighbor without other human beings compelling me to love God and my neighbor as these human beings see fit. The responsibility of political authority is to carry out justice and not love. The responsibility of individuals is to love and not carry out justice. This leaves individuals with the freedom, right, and responsibility to engage in the “most difficult collision of infinite misunderstanding,” the collision between God's understanding of them and their understanding of themselves and its temporal and eternal ramifications. Instead, we often see political authorities claiming the responsibility and need to regulate charity and love for the sake of equality and “the common good” according to utilitarian ethics, thus reducing the necessity of each individual to exercise his God-given responsibility to go before God and figure out for himself how he will love his neighbor that involves this “collision of infinite misunderstanding.” Ultimately, this inward, ongoing collision is the most important experience a human being can have—eternally speaking.

Next, Kierkegaard comes back to the issue of knowledge. Knowledge, he says, is itself neither the act of mistrust nor the act of love. “The mistrustful person and the loving person have knowledge in common, and neither is the mistrustful person mistrustful through his knowledge nor is the loving person one who loves through his knowledge. But when knowledge in a person has placed the opposite possibilities in equilibrium and he is obliged or wills to judge, then who he is, whether he is mistrustful or loving, becomes apparent in what he believes about it. Only half-experienced and very confused people think of judging another person on the basis of knowledge. This is due to their not knowing what knowledge is,” that it is only data that ought to be used with careful consideration and circumspection before a person pronounces judgment—like the “riding master” who gathers knowledge of a horse.

Someone may tell me that my wife has been unfaithful to me. This knowledge has been placed “in the equilibrium of opposite possibilities” in two ways. On the one hand, the statement is either true or false. On the other hand, I have a choice to respond out of either love or mistrust. I can either judge the statement, or I can judge my wife, or both. If I am completely mistrusting, then I will probably say that I have never trusted my wife and, therefore, I will “believe nothing at all,” that the statement may be true or false, and that she may be faithful or unfaithful. But if I am a truly loving person, then regardless of whether or not the statement is true and regardless of whether or not my wife is faithful, I will love her by “believing all things.” This is what Kierkegaard is claiming the apostle Paul means.

To explain further, Kierkegaard says that we human beings “express a great fear of making a mistake in judging,” especially of “thinking too well of a person.” We are completely distraught if we “have thought too well of a swindler,” saying to ourselves that we were “‘so stupid’ to have been made a fool of.” Thus, it seems to make sense that we be mistrustful in order that we not be made a fool of. Then Kierkegaard asks two very penetrating questions, “[S]hould it not seem just as stupid to us to have believed” ill of a good person? “Will it not sometime in eternity become even more than ‘stupid’” to have

done so? This is key in Kierkegaard's belief system, what he calls the "connection with eternity," and he will come back to it in the next section.

However, why even mention the last point so forcibly? Because, Kierkegaard says, "here in the world it is not 'stupid' to believe ill of a good person; after all, it is an arrogance by which one gets rid of the good in a convenient way." I think he means that we human beings have such a great need and desire to appear better than others, at least in our own eyes, that we will pridefully tear people down, even those who are clearly better than we are, in order to build ourselves up. Because this is a universal need, we do not call ourselves stupid for doing so. Instead, we all agree to call each other clever.

However, "the loving person truly fears being in error [by thinking well of the swindler or ill of the good person]; therefore he believes all things," which, again, sounds contradictory. Kierkegaard continues explaining that it is not knowledge that "defiles a person; it is mistrust that defiles a person's knowledge, just as love purifies it." Knowledge is the neutral commodity. Mistrust is the inclination that defiles a person, because he is not willing to believe anything at all, even the good. Thus, mistrust actually "has a preference for evil" and is in reality "*unbelief*." If "the good [i.e., God] is the object of belief," then "to believe nothing at all" is not to believe in the good [i.e., God]. Thus, "to believe nothing at all is the beginning of *being* evil, because it shows that one has no good within oneself," that is, no willingness to hold "knowledge in equilibrium," to allow it to be true or false and to allow oneself to respond to it with love even in the midst of being deceived. Mistrust has hastily jumped to the conclusion that it knows precisely and completely when it may not know at all.

Kierkegaard drives home this point by returning to the theme of eternity. He suggests that the person who judges others most confidently and quickly may find himself so wrong that the ones whom he expected not to find in heaven, precisely because he had judged them so evil, are actually there. They really had been noble and unselfish, while the ones whom he expected to meet in heaven, precisely because he judged them so good, he will not see. "Yet the person who loves believes all things. With the blessed joy of amazement he will someday see that he was right; and if he made a mistake by believing too much of the good—to believe the good is in itself a blessing. Lovingly to believe the good is certainly no defect—but then one does not make a mistake by it either." In other words, the truly loving person is willing to wait for eternity and let God sort out when he was told the truth and when he was deceived. He does not have to have justice now. In fact, he can, if necessary, wait for God's eternal justice to right all wrongs. Thus, he holds knowledge in "the opposite possibilities of equilibrium" and recognizes he has a "choice" in how he judges others, a choice that will reveal who he is, whether he is mistrustful and judges hastily by believing nothing at all, or whether he is loving and "on the basis of...faith" in God believes all things. Kierkegaard will explore this in more detail in the next section.

### **Explanation of the second part of the title—and Yet is Never Deceived**

Now, Kierkegaard addresses the second part of the title of this chapter, that while love believes all things, it does so "*and yet is never deceived*." His argument is really quite simple. The one who does not truly love is in essence a deceiver, and he deceives not only others but most especially himself, all the while claiming that he himself is not deceived. The one who truly loves *does not care* if he is deceived by others, because loving them is more important than not being deceived—for eternity's sake. Thus, he believes all things, even if he is wrong. In addition, if he does not find out until eternity that he is wrong, it is fine with him. Eternity is what he longs for, not protecting himself



from being deceived in the present world. While he would not complain if justice is served on his behalf in this world, it is not a requirement for him.

Kierkegaard begins this section by saying, “It seems to make more sense to believe nothing at all in order never to be deceived, since how would one be able to deceive a person who believes nothing at all! But, by believing all things, to throw oneself away,” so to speak, and therefore allow one to become “a prey to all deceptions and all deceivers—this is strange.” Agreed, but this is to consider deception only with respect to the present realm. The mistrustful person believes he is protecting himself against all deceivers. Yet, Kierkegaard claims, he is actually “most terribly deceived”—by himself! Why? Because he is tricking himself “out of the highest, out of the blessedness of giving of oneself, the blessedness of love” that looks towards eternity. In contrast, the one who loves “by believing all things...secures [himself] infinitely against every deception,” because he is thinking of the greater importance of the next world—eternal life. In this way, being deceived becomes less important to him than being loving.

What about God? “Can a human being deceive God?” Certainly not. Does the same go for parents? “Can a child deceive his parents?” Not if they are careful in how they love their child. Parents know that “it is only an appearance (that is, a deception)” when a child thinks he has deceived them. Yet, in reality, the child only “deceives himself.” The parents typically have superior wisdom and insight and, therefore, can detect when their child is attempting to deceive them. But “the poor child, alas, essentially deceives himself” by thinking that he is deceiving his parents when in reality he is not. Therefore, both God and parents, by loving others who try to deceive them, can never really be deceived, because their “true superiority” leads them to remain faithful to their wisdom, experience, and roles as those who are intended to love—even those who try to deceive them!

Kierkegaard points out that this logically implies both “a lower conceptual sphere that has no intimation of true love” (the world’s conception of love) and a higher conceptual sphere that understands true love (God’s conception of love). Therefore, like the child, someone who lacks this higher conception of love really experiences only one kind of deception—“self-deception”—“in the infinite sense,” i.e., in the eternal sense. However, there is no real “danger in the kind of deception the world talks about,” eternally speaking, and “[t]his...is not difficult to understand” for those who care more about love and eternity. Instead, as Kierkegaard says, the “difficulty is to accomplish the task” of acquiring the true conception of love by “believing all things” while a person “fights to keep himself in the true love.” In other words, true love is truly hard. We are so easily tempted to abandon it for the lower conception of love, because the lower view feels so right to us as it “regards loving as a demand...and being loved...as an earthly good.” In fact, it regards loving as the highest good in this realm. In other words, worldly love believes that the greatest good is to win the love of one other person in exchange for loving this person. But then, Kierkegaard states, “deception is certainly able to play the master, just as in the commercial world. A person pays out money in order to purchase some [item],” but what if he does not get the item? Then he has been deceived. “Therefore the deception must consist in the deceiver’s having won the love of the deceived person so that” the latter loves one and only one person, the deceiver, and vice versa, which is not true love. Kierkegaard has already shown in Chapter IIA of the First Series, “You *Shall* Love,” that the person who loves only one person is someone who has “fallen in love” and, therefore, is merely a “self-lover,” while a truly loving person is willing to love everyone since all are his neighbors.

He then comments on the frequency with which we hear the complaints by people who have been “deceived in love.” The irony, Kierkegaard says, is that the more vehemently a person complains, “the more it becomes a complaint against himself” as

one who is not truly loving. He, thereby, “denounces himself as...being a self-lover who therefore” loves “only one” person and not his neighbor, who is everyone as previously explained. He also denounces himself as having been deceived, “which cannot happen to one who truly loves,” because he “believes all things,” which means that he believes that the most important thing is not to avoid being deceived but to avoid not loving. The “best is love in itself” so that he will not complain when he has been deceived. He will just keep on loving.

Yet, it is not as though we are impervious to pain when we and others are deceived. Kierkegaard assures us that “[w]hen we see a truly loving person being deceived by the wily, the shady, the hypocritical, we are shocked, and why is this?” Because God has designed us with a proper sense of justice, and often we do not see the deceiver being punished in this world for his wrong doing. So it is not wrong to feel hurt when deception occurs. Yet, if what remains most important to us is that the deceiver be punished in the present realm, then we have “s[u]nk down into the lower conceptual sphere” of love where “we forget that that one who truly loves cannot be deceived,” because he has his mind focused on eternity. “In other words, in one sense the one who loves is well aware if someone deceives him, but by refusing to believe it, or by believing all things, he keeps himself in love and in this way is not deceived.” However, the refusal to believe that one is being deceived is not hiding from the truth. It is putting off judgment of the truth until eternity. It is being willing, if necessary, to live with injustice and wait for God to sort things out at the end of this realm.

Then, Kierkegaard compares the deceiver with the truly loving person in order to make it “really clear how miserable” is the former. He asks us to “imagine that it is happening before our eyes.” We picture the most deceitful, shadiest, williest person, and this corrupt individual “wants to deceive the one who truly loves” and “become loved” by him. Let us also say that “the deceiver naturally succeeds in becoming loved.” But the “poor deceiver, he does not perceive that he is dealing with one who truly loves, who loves him because the true lover loves all” as his neighbors, “who loves without making any demand for reciprocal love, who grounds love and its blessedness precisely in not requiring reciprocal love” from others. “So the deceiver has slyly gotten the loving person to love him—but that is exactly what the loving person infinitely wants”—for the sake of eternity. Kierkegaard asks, “Who, then, is the deceived,” the deceiver who firmly believes he has fooled the truly loving person into loving him, or the truly loving person who loves all whether or not they are attempting to deceive him, and who loves all even if he does not know that they are attempting to deceive him? Obviously, the deceiver is more deceived when eternity is taken into account, and the person he is deceiving the most is himself. He is tricking himself out of being a truly loving person.

“To love is indeed the highest good” and is like giving money away, because one simply wants to be charitable. But charity, Kierkegaard says in contrast to what we might think, makes a person richer even if he has less money after he gives it away. The reason is that the truly charitable person, i.e., the truly loving person, “does not in the slightest way wish or demand to get it back again” and, therefore, “is certainly not duped—because the recipient has no money,” or in this case, no love. The whole point of giving money and love is because the recipient is lacking them. And no one ever has enough of the love of the truly loving person who is willing to give his love away without asking for anything in return.

“But the sly deceiver...thinks he is the superior one and smugly smiles to himself...; he does not suspect that the one who loves is the infinitely superior one. The deceiver is blinded” by his self-deception, and “the one who truly loves has taken an unassailable position; he can no more be deceived out of his love than a man can be tricked out of the money” he simply wants to give away. In like manner, “the one who truly loves

safeguards himself by believing all things, that is, by loving the deceiver.” In other words, he protects himself for eternity’s sake against being deceived, even when he is deceived, because being loving is more important to him. “One who has fallen in love regards it as misfortune to go on loving the deceiver; the one who truly loves regards it as a victory if only he succeeds in continuing to love the deceiver.”

But does not the loving person appear to be weak in his love for the deceiver? Kierkegaard says, not at all. He asks, “Do you, my listener, know any stronger expression for superiority than this, that the superior one also appears to be the weaker?” We are tempted to answer, yes, when the superior one appears stronger. After all, which army appears stronger and, therefore, is stronger, the one with a million soldiers or the one with a hundred soldiers? And which business looks stronger and, therefore, is stronger, the one with a billion dollars in sales and a billion dollars in the bank, or the one with a hundred dollars in sales and no money in the bank? But this, Kierkegaard claims, is to measure strength by “criteria and comparison,” specifically *external* criteria. Yet, when the superiority is an “infinite superiority” and, therefore, “not directly visible,” then it shuns comparison on an external basis and is content to be stronger in its apparent “powerlessness.” This is what Kierkegaard calls “the powers of eternity,” which identify the truly loving person who depends only upon God for his sense of well-being. He neither demands to be loved by others, nor does he care if he is deceived. All that he cares about is being a truly loving person, and he has the “courage to believe all things...[and] to bear the world’s contempt and insults,” because it finds this kind of love rather ridiculous and maybe even loathsome.

To repeat and conclude, “suppose that sometime in eternity it turned out that the one who loves *actually* had been deceived!” Kierkegaard says that if “love is the highest” and the best of all commodities, then the truly loving person will in no wise object. “Alas, but the rest of us” will want to object vociferously. Here, finally, Kierkegaard indirectly admits that he has been writing about the ideal. Not even he is practicing what he is preaching. Why not? Because “it is very difficult to extricate oneself from the lower conceptual sphere” where love is measured in external terms. No kidding! “Just when one has understood the truth” of the higher conception of love, the love that is willing to love in the face of being deceived, “the old [lower conception of love] crops up again.” Kierkegaard admits that the divine, biblical view of love is so “alien” to us human beings who struggle with our own selfishness that we are like dogs who learn to walk upright for a moment but then continually want to walk on all fours. It is hard work to walk upright, so to speak, to fight against the temptation both to love by demanding love and to complain when one has not been loved or has been deceived into loving the deceiver. “—But the one who truly loves believes all things—and yet is never deceived”—for the sake of divine, biblical love and eternity.

## Chapter III

### Love Hopes All Things—and Yet Is Never Put to Shame

The previous chapter was very difficult to understand. This chapter is a piece of cake. Nevertheless, at first glance the title of this chapter also contains a contradiction. If a person hopes all things, then he hopes not only that it rains, but also that it does not rain, and certainly one way or another he will be disappointed and ashamed for having hoped for something which did not happen. In addition, expecting everything he wants to occur is unrealistic, even if his expectations are not contradictory. Therefore, a person will find himself disappointed and embarrassed, because at least one of his expectations will not be fulfilled. So the question is, how can a person hope *all things*, that everything he wants in the future will happen, and yet never be put to shame? Kierkegaard explores the answer to this question in the present chapter, extracting the statement “love hopes all things” from the apostle Paul’s letter, 1 Corinthians, and verse 7, that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Kierkegaard is apparently of the opinion that Paul believes that love truly hopes *all things* but without the person’s ever being ashamed because all of his expectations are fulfilled. Or is he? We will see.

Like the previous chapter, we can divide this one into three sections:

1. Introduction
2. Explanation of the first part of the title—*Love Hopes All Things*
3. Explanation of the second part of the title—*and Yet is Never Put to Shame*

#### Introduction

Kierkegaard is obsessed with eternity. “In many metaphors and by many representations, Holy Scripture seeks in various ways to give, through the relationship to the eternal, festivity and solemnity to this earthly life of ours, to provide air and a prospect. And this is certainly needful.” Focusing on only this life is suffocating to a human being and “why so often at various times a need is felt for a refreshing, enlivening breeze, a mighty gale, that could cleanse the air and dispel the poisonous vapors, a need for the rescuing movement of a great event that rescues by moving what is standing still...” The routine of life can make a person feel as though he is going nowhere, is only standing still. Sports events are a great example of how modern man seeks to inject into his existence a sense of movement and a fresh breeze. Life is dull and tedious during the work week, but then comes the weekend, and a much publicized battle between two highly touted quarterbacks will chase away the boredom and bring much needed excitement to dull lives. “Yet Christianity knows only one way and one resource” for enlivening our existences. “It is with the help of the eternal that Christianity at every moment creates fresh air and a prospect,” which is true even in the midst of “busyness” that may or may not pay off in the present world. Perhaps the busy person “sows” grueling but brilliant work that permits him to reap the “harvest” of great wealth as the fitting reward of his labors. Yet, perhaps he “sows” hard work and sees his efforts come to naught. However, if he “truly wills the good...”, then Christianity provides a prospect by speaking metaphorically of this earthly life as the time of sowing and of eternity as the time of harvest.” We will come back to this idea of “the good” in the next section; but, similarly, “Christianity provides a prospect by speaking metaphorically of this life as a life of hardship and struggle and of eternity as a life of victory.” In other words, Christianity requires a perspective that looks beyond the present life. It is not content with seeing only this temporal sphere of activity. It demands peering into eternity beyond death and taking it into account in one’s decisions.

The world knows how to convey honor and shame in the current realm. So often during the year we watch winners of athletic events being honored, and, while we try not to make the losers feel too bad, we see their shame. They are disappointed they did not win. They wanted the honor that comes from victory. However, “Christianity...provides life with solemnity and festivity by presenting in metaphorical language that scene in eternity where it will be eternally decided who won the wreath of honor and who was put to shame.” The contrast is obvious. “Even if a person deservedly won honor here in the world, what solemnity does the world have to give it meaning!” The answer—none in comparison to eternity.

Christianity’s help to the human being to get beyond the need to acquire honor and avoid shame in this life is “by hoping,” and not just any hoping, but hoping *all things*. Indeed, “Christianity’s hope is eternity, and Christ is the Way; his debasement is the Way, but he was also the Way when he ascended into heaven.” Christianity’s message is that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah who hoped for more than what he could attain in this world—a kingdom of this temporal earth centered in Jerusalem. He hoped for an eternal kingdom, the eternal kingdom of God, that was possible for him to attain only by fulfilling the desires of God the Father by suffering the death that sinners deserve. Yet, the Father attested to the rightness of the death of his Son by raising him from the dead so that he ascended into the eternal and heavenly realm.

#### **Explanation of the first part of the title—*Love Hopes All Things***

“But love, which is greater than faith and hope, also takes upon itself the work of hope, or takes upon itself hope, hoping for others, as a work. It is itself built up and nourished by this hope of eternity, and then in turn deals lovingly with others in this hope...” Like love, hope is a work, something that a person does in regard to others. Just as a person loves his neighbor, he also hopes for his neighbor. In addition, love includes the hope of eternity and hoping this not only for oneself but also for others, and this hope of eternity is ultimately based upon biblical love. As Kierkegaard will say, there is really only one kind of hope, eternal hope, and this hope is a byproduct of the love for our neighbor that the Bible commands us. It is impossible to love others properly without also hoping they obtain eternal life, and vice versa.

First, regarding the work of hope, “[t]o hope *all things*” is “to hope *always*.” Like love, hope never takes a break. “In other words, to hope is composed of the eternal and the temporal, which is why the expression for hope’s task in the form of eternity is to hope all things, and in the form of temporality to hope always. The one expression is no truer than the other.” With its declaration of the goal of eternal life the Bible calls us “to hope all things.” In addition, because we live in a temporal realm that will someday end, it calls us “to hope always.” There should be no waking moment when we do not hope all things. Indeed, biblical hope is “at every moment always to hope all things.”

Second, regarding the work of hope, to hope “relates to the future, to possibility, which in turn” could result in either moving forward or moving backward, in either rising or falling, in either good or evil. While “the past is actual, the future is possible.” Kierkegaard points out that, just as we normally hope for ourselves that we will move forward, rise, and acquire what is good in the present realm, we should do the same in regard to eternity, and not only for ourselves but also for others. Certainly “the eternal is eternal” and therefore is “in the future.”

Third, regarding the work of hope, biblical hope hopes for only one possibility, the “possibility of the good.” In other words, the “possibility of the good is to *hope*,” but what does Kierkegaard mean by “the good”? If I understand both the Bible and him correctly, he means eternal, moral perfection, or what we can call goodness. The Bible states that we humans are not good. In fact, we are evil and hostile towards God in the very fabric

of our being, which is to say, we are sinners who need God's forgiveness which Kierkegaard will bring up at the end of this chapter. Therefore, biblical hope is to understand there is a possibility of our becoming good and morally perfect in eternity and to want this not only for ourselves but also for others. Kierkegaard contrasts our hope for moral perfection with the "possibility of evil," which he says "is to *fear*." Nevertheless, "both the one who hopes and the one who fears are expecting" something in the future. Here Kierkegaard indirectly claims that the only thing that will exist in eternity is the good. In other words, evil will disappear at the end of the present realm. Therefore, when a person genuinely chooses to "hope," he is choosing only the "possibility of the good" which is "eternal," which is itself "an eternal decision. Only in mere possibility...are the possibilities of the good and of the evil equal," but seen in the light of God's project for the creation, "the possibility of the good is more than a possibility, because it is the eternal." Here Kierkegaard hints at his explanation of the second part of the title of this chapter, that the one who hopes all things is "never put to shame"—because to hope for the good, at least for ourselves by coming to grips with our sin and appealing to God for mercy, is to hope for that which will happen. We can count on it. God will make sure he gives us mercy and moral perfection in eternity, exactly because he is a God who responds with forgiveness to those who genuinely ask for it and thereby grants them eternal life.

Fourth, regarding the work of hope, to hope is more than "a wish, a longing, a longing expectation now of one thing, now of another." If it were not, then "it is easy enough for the youth and the child to hope," because they have the whole rest of their lives to live and to hope. "But when a person has become older, his life usually remains what it has now become, a dull repetition...of the same old thing." Nothing of the future frightens him, except perhaps death, and nothing of the future enthruses him. His life has become one of "habit,...experience, custom, and usage," in other words, of constant, boring routine. However, bring in the eternal, and true hope is possible for both the youth and the old person, because what is introduced is "the possibility of the good," which is exactly the eternal. This assumes, of course, that both the youth and the old person have inwardly embraced the superior value of eternal goodness, superior to all other possible commodities available to human beings, even the commodities of wealth, fame, power, and health in the present realm. Thus, "the eternal extends over the whole of life, and there is and should be hope to the end; then there is no period [such as youth or old age] that is the age of hope, but a person's whole life should be the time of hope!"

"But anyone who refuses to understand that the whole of one's life should be the time of hope is veritably in despair, no matter, absolutely no matter, whether he is conscious of it or not, whether he" considers himself to be well-off because of the possibility of new things in this life or is dragging himself through the boredom and tedium of his daily routine. The opposite of despair is obviously hope, but the only true hope is for "the possibility of the good," i.e., for the eternal. And "[b]y means of the possible, eternity is continually *near* enough to be available, and yet *distant enough* to keep the human being in motion forward toward the eternal." All a person has to do is to choose to hope, and eternity is either right around the corner, because death could occur at any moment, or it is distant enough to pull him along in life, because death is far enough off that there is still a lot of life to live. Nevertheless, "possibility...is a duality," because in possibility there can be either hope or fear. "But with the help of hope," which is to say with the help of eternity, possibility will lure the person who chooses properly to *hope* and not to fear. Again, this assumes that the person has become more attracted to eternal goodness and moral perfection than to anything else other than God himself.

Fifth, regarding the work of hope, if a person is going to hope all things "*lovingly*," then he is going to hope for other people, not just for himself. I have already mentioned

this, but now Kierkegaard focuses on the inseparable tie between hope for oneself and hope for other people if a person is going to commit himself to *biblical* love. He is always going to hope for “the possibility of the good for the other person,” for the possibility that God will move in the heart of the other person to face into his own evil and appeal to God for mercy sometime before his own death so that he obtains moral perfection and eternal life—regardless of how pridefully, selfishly, arrogantly, and cruelly he is behaving now.

Meanwhile, the person in despair assumes the impossibility of the good for the other person. Often we hear that people cannot and do not change. In addition, we all know others who are so cruel that we are convinced that it is impossible that they would ever change and be attracted to biblical goodness. We should realize that such despair is in contrast to the person who fears. The fearful person does not “*assume* the impossibility of the good; he fears the possibility of evil, but he does not conclude, he is not so bold as to assume the impossibility of the good.” Only the person in despair, by assuming the impossibility of the good, moves one more step away from hope. He gives up on humanity completely. He says, “It is possible that even the most fervent believer would at some time give up faith and choose unbelief. It is possible that even the most burning love would at some time cool off and freeze. It is possible that even the most upright person could still go astray and be lost. It is possible that even the best friend could be changed into an enemy, and the most faithful wife [or husband] into a” liar, since all these are possible, “despair, give up hope,” and “above all do not hope in any human being or for any human being.”

We can agree with Kierkegaard, “Yes, it is certainly possible” that there is no hope for anyone; but “then the opposite is also possible”—not because we place our hope in human beings, but in God. To give up hope completely in human beings is ultimately to give up on God! “Therefore never unlovingly give up on any human being or give up hope for that person, since it is possible that even the most prodigal son could still be saved, that even the most embittered enemy—alas, he who was your friend—it is still possible that he could again become your friend... It is possible that the love that became cold could again begin to burn. Therefore never give up on any human being; do not despair, not even at the last moment—no, hope all things.”

But “[c]oldly and defiantly the person in despair refuses to hope with regard to the other person, even less to work for the possibility of good in him...” Thus, “to give up on another as hopelessly lost, as if there were no hope for him, is evidence that one is not oneself a loving person and thus is the one who despairs, who gives up possibility. No one can hope unless he is loving; he cannot *hope for himself* without also being loving, because the good has an infinite connectedness...” If a person is fundamentally committed to goodness, then he is also committed to eternity. He has come to recognize and embrace the connection between authentic, biblical love and his own eternal destiny. However, to give up on another person and his ever becoming good in eternity is also to give up on eternity *even for oneself*. This is Kierkegaard’s sobering point. Instead, if a person is truly loving, “he also hopes for others. In the same degree to which he hopes for others, he hopes for himself, because in the very same degree to which he hopes for others, he is the one who loves.” A person cannot *lovingly* hope for himself without *lovingly* hoping for others, and vice versa. Remember the biblical commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Proper self-love and, therefore, hope for oneself are the only foundation for loving one’s neighbor, which includes hoping for the eternal good for him.

Kierkegaard uses the analogy of money to illustrate this truth. We must not think of love as we think of money. If we stop giving money to a person, we consider him to be the only one who loses. We gain the money we would have given him, and he loses it.

“But it is not this way with love. Perhaps the one who was the object of love loses, but the one who has ‘given up his love for this person,’ he is the loser too. He perhaps does not detect this himself,” but, in actuality, by giving up his love for the other person, he has “given up being loving.” And to give up being loving is to give up being committed to eternity. Therefore, a person can give up giving money “without loss” to himself; but this is not true with love. If he gives up giving love, then he does so at great loss to himself eternally, because he stops being loving! In other words, he misses out on eternal life.

Sixth, regarding the work of hope, “It is the same with despairing over another person—it means to be in despair oneself... [T]o despair over another person is to be in despair over oneself.” This is “eternity’s like for like... The one who loves hopes all things.” He is convinced “that at the last moment there is still the possibility of the good, even for the most lost—therefore still hope.” Thus, a person keeps the possibility “pure” as “he lovingly chooses the possibility of the good or hopes for the other person.” If he does not, then “it must be because there is something that weighs him down” so that he expects the other person’s demise and eternal destruction rather than hopes for the person’s eternal life. Kierkegaard calls this weighing down “worldliness” that “cannot involve itself with the possibility” of the good, and then he lists and describes the effects of several characteristics of this worldliness.

First is “*sagacity*” or a kind of wisdom that believes that “everything indeed ends in wretchedness,” which sounds more like sheer pessimism than wisdom. Kierkegaard says this “*sagacity*” always “prepares for the downfall of another person” so that it is not able “even at the last moment to hope lovingly for him!” This person has convinced himself that God is dead.

Second is “an *anger* and *bitterness*” that “hopelessly gives up on the detested person... But is this not murdering him spiritually, hurling him spiritually into the abyss...!” May he burn in hell, the person says. He is so angry and bitter that he not only gives up on hope for the other person but actually hopes that he gets what he deserves—eternal punishment.

Third is “an *evil eye*” that cannot “lovingly catch a glimpse of the possibility of the good,” because it cannot see God and his ability to change people for the sake of eternity. The person with “an *evil eye*” intentionally blinds himself to God’s goodness and mercy—even for himself. It is not a matter of his being unable to see God and his goodness, because, according to the apostle Paul in Romans 1, all human beings have knowledge of God’s goodness. However, the “*evil eye*” is unwilling to do so. This person’s problem is not that of the mind, but of the will.

Fourth and fifth, there is “*envy*” that refuses to be glad for the other person for what God has given him or for what he has acquired, perhaps because of his own hard work. “And as soon as that is certain, envy hurries home to its murky hole and calls to its even more loathsome relative that goes by the name of *malice* so that they are able to rejoice together.” He loves to assist in the other person’s downfall. He says to him, “Here, let me help you crash and burn. Or at least, I refuse to help you succeed, because I hate being in the one down position with you. You are wealthier, better looking, smarter, more accomplished than I am, and I detest you for who you are and hope you fail so that I may gloat over your failure.”

Sixth, there is “a *cowardly, timorous small-mindedness* that has not had the courage to hope for anything for itself.” This person, like the psychopath, has chosen to blind himself to God’s greatness and goodness. He looks weak and frail and thinks that he is justified in not believing in God, but it is only an act. How can anyone peer into the sky at night with its billions of stars and think that the creator God either does not exist or is too weak to help him so that he is justified in his refusing to hope? If this “*cowardly, timorous*



*small-mindedness*” cannot hope for itself, then “how could it hope for the possibility of the good for others?”

Seventh, there is “a *worldly, conceited mentality* that would die of disgrace and shame if it were to experience making a mistake, being fooled, becoming ludicrous (the most terrible of all horrors!) by having hoped something for another person that did not come about.” No one likes being made a fool, and if I cannot be absolutely certain that God will fulfill my hope of granting moral perfection and eternal life to this other person, then I refuse to allow even for the possibility that God will not make a fool of me. Therefore, I refuse to hope for the possibility of the good for the other person.

All seven of these worldly characteristics indicate that love is not present in a person. If love is not present, then neither is the eternal. If the eternal is not present, then neither is a sense of the possibility of the good. If a sense of possibility is not present, then neither is hope, and the person cannot “lovingly hope for the possibility of the good. In contrast, the loving one hopes all things... [E]very morning, yes, every moment, he renews his hope and refreshes possibility, while love abides and he in it.”

Regarding the work of hope, “Even if the one who loves was unable to do the slightest additional thing for others, was unable to bring any other gift at all, he still brings the best gift, he brings hope.” Kierkegaard says that it is like a “physician going around among the sick.” The best gift this physician brings is not “all his medications and...all his care.” The best gift is hope “when people say, ‘The physician has hope.’ Yet a physician deals only with the temporal... But the one who loves” deals with the eternal and “eternity vouches to him that there always is hope.” And the bottom line is still his love for others *in the light of eternity*. “The one who loves, the one who truly loves, does not hope *because* eternity authenticates it to him, but he hopes *because* he is one who loves, and he thanks eternity that he dares to hope. In this way he always brings the best gift...because hope, the possibility of good, is eternity’s help.” The logic of this statement is profound. The one who loves also hopes, not because he can prove that eternity will result in goodness and moral perfection, but because it just makes sense to him that love would hope for the good in eternity.

Thus, Christian hope relativizes all suffering in the present life, not by eliminating or even reducing pain, but by placing it in the context of eternity, which is the difference between a worldly perspective and a Christian perspective. “Christianity has an infinitely smaller conception of all...misfortunes and an infinitely more blessed conception of hope.” Christianity looks at all suffering in the light of eternity and says, the suffering is not as bad as I thought, because moral perfection in eternal life is better than I thought. Still, this hope of eternal life is “only with the one who” loves. “If there is no love, hope would be like a letter whose contents are—yes, they are blessed—but there would be no one to carry the letter away” to its intended recipient.

Finally, regarding the work of hope, once again Kierkegaard emphasizes that the statement “love hopes all things” means that “the loving one hopes all things for himself” and “that the loving one lovingly hopes all things for others.” These are “one and the same” which is made clear when they are placed in the context of the eternal. “Only earthly understanding which is no judge of what either love or hope is, thinks that they are two entirely different things, to hope for oneself and to hope for others, and that in turn love is a third thing by itself.” Earthly understanding thinks that “one can hope for oneself without hoping for others.” It also thinks that “one does not need love [for others] in order to hope for oneself.” Nevertheless “one certainly needs love [for others] in order to hope for others.” Then again, one would tend to hope for only those whom one loves, and certainly we do not love everyone, especially those who do not deserve to be loved, because they have been so unloving towards us. However, Kierkegaard refutes this earthly understanding by pointing out that love must be the “middle term” between

hoping for myself and hoping for others. “[W]ithout love, no hope for oneself; with love, hope for all others.” Love, therefore, includes both hope for oneself and hope for all others. The relationship looks like this: hope for myself—love—hope for all others. “Blessed is the one who loves—he hopes all things. Even in the final moment he hopes for the possibility of the good for the worst reprobate! He learned this from eternity.” To lose hope for others is to lose love for them and hope for oneself. This we should not do.

### **Explanation of the second part of the title—and Yet is Never Put to Shame**

It should be obvious why a person would be “put to shame” with reference to his hope. If his hope, that is, his expectation, does not get fulfilled and it was not only something he was absolutely counting on but also something that everyone else was counting on, then he will be ashamed if it does not happen. Witness the embarrassment of a top-ranked athletic team when they lose to a no-name team and everyone was expecting them to crush their opponent. The sportswriters even get on the shaming bandwagon and start pointing fingers at any unlucky target that just adds to the embarrassment, especially as long as the talking heads keep talking. Thus, Kierkegaard is totally correct when he says, “we think that someone is put to shame if his hope or expectancy is not fulfilled.” It is perilous in the present world to miscalculate and be wrong about the future for “[w]hat the world admires most and honors exclusively is sagacity, or acting sagaciously.” The world applauds those who are bright enough to predict the future and make wise choices that allow them to succeed because of their predictions, but woe to the one who is wrong. His embarrassment is justly deserved.

However, Kierkegaard claims that “to act sagaciously is the most contemptible of all.” Why? “[B]ecause acting sagaciously is bearing false witness against the eternal with one’s whole life, is simply stealing one’s existence from God.” This is a rather bold statement—that to predict the future and make successful choices based upon one’s predictions is a hostile act towards God! Are, therefore, all the investment advisers who help their clients successfully build their retirement portfolios disobeying God? I think Kierkegaard is once again speaking of the extreme and the ideal. He calls “acting sagaciously” a “*halfway approach*, whereby one undeniably gets furthest ahead in the world, wins the world’s goods and advantages and the world’s honor, because, in the eternal sense, the world and the world’s advantages are half-measures.” Again, are the rich and famous evil simply because they have wealth and fame? No, if these are not what they fundamentally “aspire” for. As Kierkegaard says, “neither the eternal nor Holy Scripture has taught anyone to aspire to get ahead or furthest ahead in the world; on the contrary, it warns against getting too far ahead in the world in order, if possible, to keep oneself unstained by the defilement of the world.” Here the “defilement of the world” must be the abandonment of the eternal and, therefore of God, for the sake of such things as riches and fame.

Perhaps shame lies deeper, lies in what one hopes. “Therefore one is essentially put to shame just as much whether one’s hope is fulfilled or not... Yet if one hopes for something for which it is a shame to hope, regardless of whether the hope is fulfilled or not, one does not really hope.” The extreme example of such hope would be shame itself. If I hope to be ashamed and embarrassed because of my behavior, can I really call this “hope.” Is not this more insanity? “It is a misuse of the noble word ‘hope’ to bring it into connection with something like that, because to hope relates essentially and eternally to the good.”

The natural way of understanding shame is “by hoping...for some earthly advantage”—fame, wealth, power, etc. Then, when that earthly advantage is not realized, we feel ashamed because the world places so much value on it. However, Kierkegaard points out that “the shame is actually not that it did not come to pass, that

one's hope was not fulfilled; the shame is that it now becomes apparent," on the basis of how disappointed I am about not obtaining what I hoped for, "how important such an earthly advantage was" to me. However, this is not hope according to the Bible. This is "wishing" and "craving" for that which is less important than eternity. This is being willing to settle for the half-measure of the honor that the world provides in the current realm instead of the honor that God provides in eternity.

Another legitimate way of understanding shame is to give up hope for another person, that God will change him in this life so that he loves and hopes for the good of eternity—and then it happens. God does change him and saves him from his hopelessness and hostility towards God. Ultimately, though, Kierkegaard will argue that "one is actually put to shame" by giving up on the other person regardless of the outcome of that person's life, i.e., whether or not God changes him.

It is also possible to "be put to shame by hoping evil for someone—if it becomes apparent that everything turns out for the good for him." Kierkegaard is talking here about the "vindictive person" who "says that he hopes to God that vengeance will fall upon the hated one. But truly this is not hoping, this is hating, and it is brazen to call it a hope and blasphemous to want to make God one's collaborator in hating." This person is put to shame no matter what happens, because he hopes for evil and not for good.

"But the one who loves hopes all things and yet is never put to shame." When the apostle Paul writes that "hope maketh not ashamed" (Romans 5:5;KJV), what does he mean? Kierkegaard is of the opinion that "most immediately" this is "the hope that pertains to the hoping one himself, his hope for the forgiveness of sins" and obtaining eternal life after death that would include "a blessed reunion with those from whom life or death has separated him." Is there any other legitimate hope in the Bible? Certainly nothing that compares with forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In this way, "Holy Scripture is very consistent in its use of language. It does not name as hope any and every expectancy, the expectancy of a multitude of things; it knows only one hope, the hope, the possibility of the good; and of this hope, the only one that *could* be put to shame because to have it is an [eternal] honor, of this hope" the Bible says that it will never be put to shame.

The latter hope is in regard to the one who hopes. It is a hope for himself. God has promised and guaranteed that those who genuinely hope for moral perfection for themselves will receive it in eternal life. However, what if a person hopes for another, even lovingly hopes for another, that this person will obtain the good of moral perfection in eternal life? Is it not possible that his hope will put him to shame if it is not fulfilled? In other words, is it not possible that the person hoped for will "be eternally lost" and the one who had hoped for moral goodness for him would then "be put to shame"?

Thus, Kierkegaard wonders about the prodigal son. What if the son had never returned and sought the forgiveness of his father? What if instead he had died in his sins and been buried with shame? Then should not his father, who had always hoped all things for his son, also feel ashamed as he stood at his son's grave, because he had a son who never humbled himself and asked for forgiveness but instead had wasted his inheritance in profligate debauchery? And what if, in addition, there were no salvation for his prodigal son beyond the grave? Would this not add to the father's embarrassment by putting him to shame in eternity? No, says Kierkegaard, because eternity has its own "conception of honor and shame," and it does not involve the outcome of other people's lives, even that of one's own prodigal son. Eternity considers only "what the expectancy was. In eternity everyone will be compelled to understand that it is not the outcome that determines the honor or shame, but the expectancy itself. In eternity, therefore, it is the unloving one, who perhaps turned out to be right in what he small-mindedly, enviously, hatefully expected of another person, it is he who will be put to shame—although his

expectancy was fulfilled. But honor belongs to the loving one” whether or not his expectancy regarding others is fulfilled. The loving one may have mistakenly hoped for the goodness of eternal life for someone who does not receive it, but “in eternity there is [really] only one mistake:” to have lived a life disregarding love and hope of the good for oneself or others. Such a mistake tragically shuts one out from salvation, especially if his expectation was that another person would be shut out from salvation and it comes true. Kierkegaard calls this an attitude of “small-minded, envious, hateful expectancy.”

Finally, in eternity there will be no mockers to mock the silliness of having hoped for the good of those who did not obtain it, because “only blessedly happy voices are heard in eternity.” In fact, no one will object to anyone’s having hoped all things when perhaps none of a person’s hopes regarding others was fulfilled, because everyone, especially God, will agree that hope based upon love was the requirement for obtaining eternal life, not correctly predicting the future for any individual. Thus, love hopes all things—and yet is never put to shame.

## Chapter IV

### Love Does Not Seek Its Own

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:5, “Love does not seek its own.” Kierkegaard says that the reason for this is that “to seek its own is simply self-love, selfishness, self-seeking.” If I seek only what belongs to me, then I am being selfish and I have no concern for others and what belongs to them. I care about only myself. “And yet, God is love...and does he not seek his own?” Does not God seek human beings who love him, because he has made them in his image? God has created human beings and given them life. Therefore, it can be said that they belong to him, and, by seeking them, he seeks his own, which appears to contradict the apostle Paul’s statement “Love does not seek its own.” However, seeking one’s own is permissible for God, because he not only creates the human beings who love him, but he also creates their love for him. They would neither exist nor love him if God did not create them as such. Kierkegaard calls this God’s “giving all things.” God “gives” by creating all that he seeks. In this way, God seeks his own, his own creative activities, which is legitimate for only God to do.

And what about Jesus Christ, the God-man? Kierkegaard calls him our “prototype,” because Christ “sought his own by giving himself for all so that they might be like him in what was his own, in sacrificial giving of himself.” Jesus gave away all that was his own—himself. Usually, the word “seek” implies taking, not giving. However, Christ as our “prototype” showed that true biblical seeking of one’s own involves giving, indeed sacrificial giving, not taking. His sacrificial giving of himself was in order that he might seek “his own,” i.e., his own kind of people who would give of themselves sacrificially the same way he did.

In addition, this true love which “is a giving of oneself” has as its purpose to help another person to seek God, which God himself is seeking, which is his own. Christ as the Son of God, as the God-man, God incarnate, by his sacrificial death sought to help other human beings to seek the Father’s mercy and to love the Father, which means that biblical love does not seek for “oneself to become the object of love,” but for God to become the object of love. To seek to become the object of love is “reserved for God alone.” Only he has the right to be so self-centered. In contrast, for a human being to seek “to become the object of another human being’s love” is to seek his own “fraudulently.” It is to usurp God’s position and right since “the only true object of a human being’s love is *love*,” i.e., God, because only God is “Love itself.”

Now that Kierkegaard has established that the only way for a human being, even the God-man Jesus, to love is through “the work of sacrificially giving of” himself, he proceeds to make clearer what it means that “love does not seek its own.” First, he offers that love does not seek its own because “*there are no mine and yours in love.*” If I cannot say that something is “mine” and that something else is “yours,” then there is no “one’s own” at all, in which case “*it is of course impossible to seek one’s own.*”

Kierkegaard uses the concept of justice to begin to explain this no mine and yours in love. “Justice is identified by its giving each his own” according to what a person either already has or deserves to receive. In fact, justice “judges and punishes if anyone refuses to make a distinction between *mine* and *yours*. The individual has the right to do as he pleases with...[his] legally entitled *mine*.” If he wants to watch *his* television, then this is his prerogative. Yet, if someone steals *his* television, then “justice intervenes” and sends the police to investigate and work on returning the property from the thief, because justice “safeguards the common security in which everyone has his own, what he rightfully has.” The only time when it becomes confusing as to what is “one’s own” is when radical “change intrudes” such as a “revolution, a war, an earthquake, or some

such terrible misfortune.” During these unsettling events, justice “tries in vain to secure for each person what is his own,” but it cannot perfectly “maintain the distinction between *mine* and *yours*.” Witness the looting after a catastrophe when desperate people resort to desperate measures in order to stay alive. They are compelled by their changed circumstances to steal what is not their own (“yours”) in order to make it their own (“mine”).

However, Kierkegaard claims that, in a certain sense, love produces the same confusion and blurs the line between what is *mine* and what is *yours*, but in the “happiest” of ways. Certainly love, true biblical love, is a “change” from the way the world normally operates. Indeed, it is the only proper, “the most remarkable” and “the most desirable,” change for human beings. “Love is a revolution, the most profound of all, but the most blessed! So, then, with love there is confusion; in this blissful confusion there is for lovers no distinction between *mine* and *yours*. Wonderful! There are *you* and *I*, and there is no *mine* and *yours*! For without a *you* and an *I*, there is no love, and with *mine* and *yours*, there is no love.” It is easy to get lost in the pronouns, but all Kierkegaard is saying is that if there are no human beings (the *you* and *I*), then obviously biblical, human love cannot exist; and the same is true if human beings are unwilling to share what is theirs with others. In the latter case, all that exists is what is *mine* and *yours*. I hold on to what is *mine*, and you hold on to what is *yours*; but this is not biblical, human love, because no one is willing to give what is theirs to others. Instead, true love is a revolution, and, the “more profound the revolution, the more completely the distinction ‘*mine* and *yours*’ disappears” and results in the “more perfect” love.

What about “erotic love and friendship?” asks Kierkegaard. Is not the distinction “*mine* and *yours*...entirely canceled” in these relationships so that we can call erotic love and friendship true, biblical love? When “the person who has fallen in love feels outside himself...in the blissful confusion” of his erotic feelings, does he not think that all that is his belongs just as much to his lover. Does he not want to hand over immediately everything that he owns to his beloved as an act of sacrificial giving? And vice versa so that there is an “exchange” resulting in “a communal *yours* and *mine*?” By being exchanged, *mine* and *yours* become *ours*,” and it is in this exchange that “erotic love and friendship have their strength.” However, Kierkegaard claims that “erotic love and friendship *as such* are only enhanced and augmented self-love.” They are not true, biblical love. Why not? Because the “contentious distinction between *mine* and *yours* still lies dormant within as a possibility. The exchange of rings between lovers is regarded as a very expressive symbol of erotic love..., but it is a poor symbol of love—it is after all, an exchange.” Yet, an “exchange by no means abolishes the distinction ‘*mine* and *yours*,’ because that for which I exchange myself then becomes mine again.” A man gives all that he has to his wife, but he still retains ownership of it. His “own” remains his “own.” Therefore, the distinction between mine and yours is not completely canceled in either romantic love or friendship.

Then how can the “distinction ‘*mine* and *yours*’” completely disappear? First we must realize that the “distinction ‘*mine* and *yours*’ is an antithetical relation.” I think Kierkegaard means that these two words, “*mine*” and “*yours*,” not only stand in opposition to one another, but also require each other in order to give them meaning. The word “*mine*” only makes sense if “*yours*” exists. For example, to call the computer on which I am typing “*mine*” would not really mean anything if there were no other people on earth. Of course it is “*mine*.” Whose else could it be? Therefore, at least one other person, a “*you*,” must exist if the words “*mine*” and “*yours*” are going to make sense.

Let us see how Kierkegaard tries to get rid of “the distinction ‘*mine*’ and ‘*yours*.’” First, “let us try to take away entirely...[the] ‘yours’... What do we have then? Then we have

crime...because the thief, the robber, the swindler, the assailant will” no longer acknowledge the “*yours*.” As far as all these criminals are concerned, everything that belongs to others is “*mine*,” i.e., theirs; but “justice understands that a criminal actually has no *mine*,” because he has placed himself outside the distinction. The less he is willing to acknowledge the “*yours*” of others, the more he has no right to the “*mine*” of his own until he loses even his freedom when he is locked up in prison.

“Now take away entirely the...‘mine’ from the distinction ‘*mine*’ and ‘*yours*.’ What, then, do we have? Then we have the self-sacrificing, the self-denying-in-all-things, the true [biblical] love” that “does not seek its own” but instead is willing to share everything it has with others. However, Kierkegaard points out that, though this self-sacrificing person gives up all that is his such that the “*mine*” disappears in the present life, it nevertheless does not disappear forever, because he still has what is most importantly his—eternity. Such is the beauty of Christianity. The one who truly loves says, “All things are mine—I, who have no *mine* at all.” How can this apparent contradiction be true? Because “the fact that all things are his is a divine secret” whereby “in salvation’s mysterious understanding all things become his, his who had no *mine* at all.” He has “won all things,” that is, all eternal things, especially God and eternal life. Therefore, even if he has given up all that is “*mine*” in this life, he will gain all that is “*mine*” in the next life. In this way, the “one who truly loves does not seek his own.” He does not have to. He can be robbed or swindled, or miss out on the exchange of what is “*mine*” and “*yours*” in marriage and friendship, and he is still happy and blessed, because he knows he has all things in eternity. But “what a laughingstock he is—in the eyes of the world! The truly loving person becomes the unconditionally injured one,” injured by the world that demands justice, equity, and community, and yet, he is the truly blessed one, “because he has eternally forgotten” the distinction of “*mine*” and “*yours*” as he loves sacrificially and is “conscious of being sacrificed.”

All this sounds impossible to pull off, but Kierkegaard does not stop here. He delves even more deeply into the concept of “distinctiveness.” He writes, “*Love does not seek its own. The truly loving one does not love his own distinctiveness but, in contrast, loves every human being according to his distinctiveness; but “his distinctiveness” is what for him is his own; that is, the loving one does not seek his own; quite the opposite, he loves what is the other’s own.*”

The profundity of these statements is astounding. For example, look at nature. “Even the least, the most insignificant, the most unimpressive, the poor little flower disregarded by even its immediate surroundings, the flower you can hardly find without looking carefully—it is as if this, too, had said to love: Let me become something in myself, something distinctive.” The result? Love helps the undistinguished flower become distinctive and valuable in and of itself by making no distinction between it and all the other flowers, because love loves “the diverse.” It “makes no distinction at all” by loving all without distinction. “Wondrous love!” True love is willing to allow others to be different according to God’s design of each and every one of us as his creatures made in the image of God. Nature is willing to let the insignificant flower be significant, simply because it is different from all other flowers. God has designed the insignificant flower. Therefore, it is not insignificant. It is a creation of the transcendent God! So is each human being, no matter how insignificant or different he is from others. He is still a human being made in the image of God, and love says let him be different and distinctive according to God’s design. Let the insignificant person be significant, simply because he is different from all other human beings. Kierkegaard is not saying that a person can be distinctive by being immoral. Obviously, morality, of which love is the highest element, is the only area where human beings ought not to be distinctive. Yet, to an extent, people should be allowed to be in process in discovering how they should act

morally, unless justice needs to intervene in the case of the criminal as Kierkegaard has already described.

In contrast, “[t]he rigid, the domineering person lacks flexibility.” He is unwilling to be like nature. He has no “pliability to comprehend others” where they are in life. Instead, “he demands his own from everyone, wants everyone to be transformed in his image” so that everyone is just like him. On a rare occasion, “he makes an exception” (so he thinks) by comprehending another person a particular way. “Whether this is exactly that other person’s distinctiveness or not makes no difference,” because this is simply how “the rigid and domineering person” *wants* to think about him. “If the rigid and domineering person cannot ever create [and indeed, much to his chagrin, he cannot because he is not God even though he believes himself to be as powerful as God], he wants to transform” others into what he wants them to be. In this manner, he “seeks his own so that wherever he points he can say: See, it is my image, it is my idea, it is my will. Whether the rigid and domineering person is assigned a large sphere of activity or a small one, whether he is a tyrant in an empire or a domestic tyrant in a little attic room essentially makes no difference; the nature is the same: domineeringly refusing to go out of oneself, domineeringly wanting to crush the other person’s distinctiveness or torment it to death.” In this way, the *rigid, the domineering person* cannot love and is unwilling to keep himself from seeking his own. He must always seek his own by compelling others to become like him.

Likewise, the person of “*small-mindedness*,” who is “enviously imperious” and “cowardly timorous...creates itself and also distorts God,...who lovingly gives *all things* and yet gives all things distinctiveness.” This person is “neither truly proud nor truly humble.” He is just a “small-minded person” who “has never had the courage...*before God*” to be himself—“the emphasis is on ‘before God,’ since this is the source and origin of all distinctiveness.” The *small-minded* person is simply too afraid to embrace his distinctiveness that comes from God. He cannot allow himself to be different, unique, an individual who stands alone before God. If he did, then others may not like him. They may abandon him, because they do not like how different he is from them, but the “one who has ventured this has distinctiveness.” He has come to know and appreciate the distinctiveness that God has given him, which, in turn, allows him to believe completely in everyone else’s distinctiveness. Distinctiveness is a gift of God, who “creates out of nothing” and thus “creates distinctiveness” in all things so that “the creature” never becomes “nothing even though it is taken from nothing.” Instead, it “becomes a distinctive individuality.” Only those who have the courage to embrace their own distinctiveness can allow others to be different in their own way—according to the creative design of God.

“Small-mindedness, on the other hand, which is an *assumed nature*, has no distinctiveness,” which is to say that “it has not believed in its own and therefore it cannot believe in anyone else’s either. The small-minded person has clung to a very specific” way of thinking of himself and “that he calls his own.” As a result, “he seeks only that” kind of person and “can love only that” kind of person. In this way, “small-mindedness holds together with small-mindedness; they grow together, which, in the spiritual sense, is just as harmful as an ingrown toenail.” Ouch! While this kind of love is praised by the world as the “highest,” because people bond together in such a way that they are inseparable friends, they nevertheless “distance themselves from true love.” They may even bond together in a church in the name of Christ; but their bond is still “as harmful as an ingrown toenail,” because their small-mindedness betrays them as enemies of God and Christ. They all think the same way and hold to the same doctrinal statement, having *concluded* they are right and there is basically nothing more to learn, thereby denying they are existing human beings who must continue striving and continue



learning (cf. “Concluding Unscientific Postscript to *Philosophical Fragments*,” pgs. 106ff.). They believe they have actually arrived at the truth, but also their belief becomes mere “custom and habit.” They speak the same way, sing the same songs, say the same prayers, hear the same sermons, perform the same religious practices, support the same church programs. However, in their small-mindedness, while they mimic each other right down to the “slightest petty detail,” they “displace everything [and everyone] else.” Their love in the name of Christ cannot permit any authentic distinctiveness. They make it abundantly clear that no one else is welcome in their group. They are the in-group, and everyone else must remain outside, unless, of course, they are willing to change and become just like them in their small-mindedness. Small-mindedness always “feels a clammy, uncomfortable anxiety upon” encountering the unfamiliar or the different, “and nothing is more important than to get rid of it. Small-mindedness demands of God, as it were, that every such distinctiveness be destroyed so that small-mindedness will be shown to be in the right and God to be a jealous God—jealous for small-mindedness.”

“It may at times serve as an excuse that small-mindedness itself actually imagines that its miserable invention is the truth” so that it seeks to persuade others to become like it—in the name of truth and God, the best name of all. Nevertheless, it really is just “self-defense” and “self-preservation that makes small-mindedness so active in order to get rid of everything else but its own.... One sees in its glance how basically unsure it is of itself deep down,” and, therefore, how it quietly waits for its prey, to convert the other person to its small-minded falsehood while it nevertheless thinks that it is right and ready to defeat all others—who are different.

Then Kierkegaard comes back to the concepts of romantic love and friendship. “But do not erotic love and friendship love the beloved and the friend according to his distinctiveness?” Yes, to a degree. It turns out that “[e]rotic love and friendship have a limit” to their love. They will not love the “other’s distinctiveness” if he chooses not to love them, which makes the beloved and friend too distinct for romantic love’s and friendship’s tastes. They are not willing to love sacrificially. “But true love, the self-sacrificing love, which loves every human being according to his distinctiveness, is willing to make every sacrifice—it does not seek its own.” True love can continue loving the beloved even if he chooses to be distinctive by not being one’s beloved. True love can continue loving the friend even if he chooses to be distinctive by no longer being a friend. Thus, erotic love and friendship are limited in their willingness to allow the other person to be different.

Next, Kierkegaard delves even more deeply into love’s not seeking its own by addressing the concept of independence that true love hopes for all other human beings, “*Love does not seek its own; it rather gives in such a way that the gift looks as if it were the recipient’s property.*”

“When in a civic setting we speak about the circumstances of people, we distinguish between those who are their own masters and those who are dependent, and we wish that everyone might at some time be in a position to become his own master.” Adam Smith could not have said it better. Having the liberty and ability to be one’s own master in society within the reasonable bounds of morality is what we should wish and pursue for everyone. The ideal is for each person to be dependent on no one but himself for his providing what he needs in life, except to the extent that it is helpful and even necessary to be dependent on others. A government needs citizens in order to exist, but the government should allow its citizens to remain independent and their own masters except when justice should intervene and punish criminals. A business needs a stable government and customers in order to exist, but businesses should want to remain independent of the government, even when they fail, and also allow their customers to

remain independent and their own masters, all which makes for the most productive of environments. Kierkegaard says that this is true even “in the world of spirit,” that true love should want “to help someone...become free, independent, his own master, to help him stand alone”—before God. This is the greatest help one human being can give another—to help another person know and understand the biblical message so that he owns it himself and can say: God, I believe and embrace the truth, not because some other person has told me this is the truth, but because I have thought it through for myself. True love helps another person acquire the appropriate wisdom to live life well without wholly depending on others’ wisdom and counsel so that he can say: God, I have made my choices as wisely as possible, because I wrestled with the options and believe that my choices were the correct ones.

Thus, “the one who loves also knows how to make himself unnoticed so that the person helped does not become dependent upon him—by owing to him” the greatest help that he has been given. “If I say, ‘This person is standing by himself through my help,’” then I have actually deceived him. I have explicitly and publicly declared that his independence is because of my help. This is the way the world speaks, by pointing out how helpful people have been in helping others, even helping others so that they do not need others’ help. However, the world’s purpose in making these public declarations is so that people will be applauded for their help, even the help they provide those who become independent of their help. The world desires the affirmation of even those whom they help. Thus, “the one who is helped in the wrong way...is inexhaustible in praising and thanking me for the greatest beneficence (that he stands by himself through the help of his dependent relationship to me).”

Instead, “the true way makes itself invisible and thus is not seen.” It remains in the background and does not need others’ accolades. “The greatest [good], therefore, cannot be done in such a way that the recipient comes to know that it is to me that he owes it, because if he comes to know that, then it simply is not the greatest beneficence. On the other hand, if someone says, ‘This person is standing by himself—through my help’ and what he says is true, well, then he has done for this person the highest that one human being can do for another, has made him free, independent, himself, his own master... Therefore [the goal of true, biblical love is]: to stand by oneself—through another’s help!” Notice the difference in how Kierkegaard has written the last statement. First, he wrote, “This person is standing by himself through my help.” Now, he writes, “This person is standing by himself—through my help.” The only difference in these two sentences is the dash, “—”. But the dash, for him, is a huge difference.

“Many authors use the dash [—]” in their writings; but “a dash has never been used more significantly and never can be used more significantly than in this little sentence... because in this little sentence infinity’s thought is contained in a most ingenious way.” The person is “standing by himself—more you do not see. You see no help or support... No, he is standing by himself—through another’s help. But this person’s help is hidden from him—the one who was helped?” Yes, it is hidden, if the one who was helped has truly become independent. The other person’s help “is hidden behind the dash.”

Kierkegaard first cites the example of Socrates as someone who comes close to demonstrating true love. “There is a noble wisdom that nevertheless in a good sense is infinitely crafty and cunning... That noble, simple soul of ancient times was a master in this wisdom. Truly that noble man was by no means exactly a bad or evil person.” Instead, “he was a thinker, although not as profound as the manner of speaking in the modern way of thinking, although not as admirable as that in being able to explain—because it was impossible for him to explain more than he understood.” Socrates was a philosopher, but, unlike the philosophers of Kierkegaard’s day, he never claimed to know more than he really understood. In addition, he did not want to teach others. He wanted

to help others teach themselves and arrive at their own conclusions by asking leading questions.

“This noble rogue had understood in the profound sense that the highest love one human being can do for another is to make him free, help him to stand by himself.” He also understood that if such freedom is to be accomplished for the other person, then “the helper must be able to make himself anonymous, must magnanimously will to annihilate himself.” He was to be a spiritual “midwife.” On the other hand, the world cannot understand this kind of unselfishness. It wants all the public credit it can get, but “the one who truly loves and that noble rogue agree.” The latter was aware “of what time and industry and art it had taken to deceive the other into the truth, of how much misunderstanding he had had to endure from the one he helped” by luring him away from his silly errors “and tricking him into the truth.” The only problem was that people get angry when they are deprived of their silly errors, because they have depended so heavily on them their whole lives, and this dependence they even call love. They consider their errors to be their “greatest treasure,” but this “noble rogue” had tricked them into the truth so that each “individual [wa]s standing by himself. Then we come to the dash, and with the dash a smile comes upon the lips of that noble, yet roguish one, and he says, ‘Now this individual is standing by himself—through my help.’ He keeps to himself the secret of this indescribable smile. Truly there is not a trace of evil in this smile.” Thus the smile is “the self-consciousness of ingenuity.”

Nevertheless, the smile betrays a love that falls short of true, biblical love. Kierkegaard goes on to say, “It is different with the one who loves.” He knows about the dash, but he knows nothing of the smile. “Whereas the rogue makes himself infinitely light precisely in the cunning of the dash,” the truly loving person means something completely different by the dash. For him, it “is like a heavy breath, almost like a deep sigh. In this dash are hidden the sleeplessness of anxiety, the night watch of work, the almost desperate exertion; in this dash is hidden a fear and trembling that has never found any expression and for that very reason is all the more terrible. The one who loves has understood that it is the greatest...to help [another human being] to stand by himself, to become himself, to become his own master; but he has also understood the danger and the suffering in the midst of the work, and above all the terribleness of the responsibility. Therefore, giving thanks to God, he declares: Now this individual is standing by himself—through my help. But there is no self-satisfaction in the last phrase, because the loving one has understood that essentially every human being stands by himself—through God’s help—and that the loving one’s [making himself invisible in the process] is really only in order not to hinder the other person’s” relationship with God, “so that all the loving one’s help infinitely vanishes” in the other person’s relationship with God. The loving person “works without reward, since he makes himself nothing, and in the very moment when there could be” the possibility of his being proud of himself, “God enters in and he is again [made invisible], which nonetheless is for him his salvation.”

An example of this process of helping others become independent is the love of a parent for a child. Anyone who has sought to raise a child in the most loving way knows how many sleepless nights and how much hard work this kind of love entails. He also knows how important it is that his love for his child helps him to become independent so that he can stand on his own two feet in this world and provide for himself. He also knows how tempting it is to say to his child: Do you know how much I have done for you in order to help you become independent? But if the parent is really aware of the nature of reality, he knows that his child ultimately is helped by God through him to become independent. There is no Socratic, roguish smile of self-satisfaction when his child demonstrates his independence. There is only the dash, “—”, of humility and vanishing

behind God and God's relationship with the child. Certainly the child stands by himself—through the parent's help, but the parent realizes that it is really God's help.

The one who truly loves does not seek his own, "because he gives in precisely such a way that it looks as if the gift were the recipient's property. Insofar as the loving one is able, he seeks to encourage a person to become himself, to become his own master." Thus, "the loving one...is shoved aside" as "the hidden benefactor" since it is every person's God-given purpose "to become free, independent, oneself. If the one who loves in this respect has become God's co-worker," then everything is happening according to God's desire for every human being; but "if it is noticed that the one who loves has helped, then...the helper has not lovingly helped."

"What a wonderful remembrance the one who loves acquires as thanks from the world!" A dash! "In a way he can pack his whole life into" the dash. "He can say: I have worked as much as anyone..., but what have I accomplished—a dash!" He can say further: "I have suffered as heavily as anyone, as deeply as only love can suffer, but what have I gained—a dash! I have proclaimed the truth as clearly and well thought through as anyone, but who has appropriated it—a dash! In other words, if he had not been one who loves, he would have loudly and directly proclaimed the truth, less well thought through, and promptly had adherents who would have appropriated the truth—and hailed him as master!"

"Has, then, the life of the one who loves been wasted?" By receiving only a dash as his reward, has he helped others for nothing? Is it a waste not to seek one's own and thereby receive more than a dash for one's hard work of loving others? Well, "in a certain sense his life is squandered on existence, on the existence of others. Unwilling to waste any time or energy on asserting himself, on being something for himself, in his self-sacrifice he is willing to perish." He is willing to be "completely and wholly transformed into simply being an active power in the hands of God. This is why his activity cannot be visible." He helped others become their own masters—invisibly. Therefore he showed that true "love does not seek its own," but only that of others. He "has eternally forgotten" the distinction of "*mine*" and "*yours*" as he loves sacrificially.

Once again we take a deep breath and realize that Kierkegaard is speaking of the ideal. No one can pull off such a life perfectly, except Christ, the God-man. Yet, he is our "prototype" and his living for God by sacrificing himself to love others is what we pursue, albeit imperfectly until the dash, "—", of eternity becomes "*mine*" and we finally obtain what we long for more than anything in the present world—eternal life and moral perfection in the next realm.

## Chapter V

### Love Hides a Multitude of Sins

All along in this book, Kierkegaard has been making it clear that the eternal is the purpose for the temporal. God has created this world in preparation for the next. This world ultimately does not make sense unless we understand its relationship to the eternal realm after it. Another way Kierkegaard says the same thing at the beginning of this chapter is by bringing up again the concept or “redoubling,” that “a temporal object never has redoubling in itself.” He means that something such as a rock exists only in this temporal realm. It will not survive into eternity simply because it exists now. It requires God’s causing it to exist eternally if it is going to do so. Nothing in the created realm causes itself to exist now or into eternity. God is the cause of all existence, which means essentially that all existence is a miracle. Thus, an object in this temporal realm cannot exist or act in such a way that it can cause itself to exist eternally.

While nothing can exist in and of itself into eternity, a human being can contain the eternal in a manner of speaking. Kierkegaard says, “When...the eternal is in a human being, this eternal redoubles in him in such a way that every moment it is in him, it is in him in a double mode: in an outward direction and in an inward direction back into itself, but in such a way that this is one and the same, since otherwise it is not redoubling.” Kierkegaard is saying that anytime a person who is living for the sake of eternity, this person’s actions have both an external effect and an internal effect, and he is aware of both and wants both. The eternal in this person seeks to act towards others for the sake of their relationships with God, which then is for the sake of his own relationship with God. He has honestly faced into his lack of moral perfection and innate hostility towards God, which makes him unworthy of eternal life. He has appealed to God for eternal mercy and received the promise of eternal life and escape from eternal condemnation. He then considers God’s mercy so significant that he is willing to be merciful to others for the sake of demonstrating what he has received from God, which, in turn, reminds him of his own inward commitment to God for his mercy.

Kierkegaard goes on to say that true biblical love, because it is tied to the eternal, also involves this double movement. Or it can be said to involve two movements simultaneously—an outward movement toward the one who is being loved and an inward movement toward oneself and God. This inward movement takes into account the eternal purpose of love. The loving person knows he needs God’s mercy, God’s rescue from eternal condemnation, and he loves others as God has loved him.

Kierkegaard then talks about what must have been a common Danish saying in his day, “Love gives bold confidence.” He says that “[w]herever love is present, it spreads bold confidence” in other people. They are emboldened to love because of the one who is loving them, which is in contrast to the “mistrustful person” who “scares everyone away.” He spreads mistrust in others so that people are afraid of one another, and “crafty and cunning” persons “spread anxiety and painful disquietude around them.” Their deceit leads people to avoid one another in order to keep from being deceived, and “a domineering person...is as oppressive as the heavy pressure of sultry air.” He makes people feel as though they are not free to be themselves. They must follow him. Also, when we talk about love’s giving bold confidence, we mean not only that love results in bold confidence in others, but also “that the one who loves has bold confidence...on the Day of Judgment.” In other words, the biblically loving person can be confident that God will be merciful towards him at the final judgment. God will grant him eternal life and rescue him from the eternal punishment that he deserves for his inward hostility towards God.

Thus when we say, “‘Love saves from death,’ the redoubling in the thought is immediate: the one who loves saves another person from death, and in quite the same or yet in another sense he saves himself from death.” I assume Kierkegaard is referring to eternal death that can result from the Day of Judgment. When a person lovingly helps another human being become a biblically loving person in order to gain God’s mercy, then he also helps himself to do the same. Yet, Kierkegaard is quick to add, “But love never thinks of the latter, of saving itself.” He is not saying that the loving person should never ever think of his own eternal salvation. Rather the biblically loving person does not want to make it publicly obvious that this is why he is acting in a loving way towards others. He is not interested in boasting to the world that he is a biblically loving person. He is willing to have God be the only one who knows if this is the case because God’s knowledge of his love is the only knowledge that matters—eternally at the judgment. Therefore, “the one who loves thinks only of lovingly giving bold confidence and saving another from death.”

“Yet the one who loves is not therefore forgotten. No, the one who in love forgets himself, forgets his suffering, in order to think of someone else’s, forgets his misery in order to think of someone else’s, forgets what he himself loses in order lovingly to bear in mind someone else’s loss, forgets his advantage in order lovingly to think of someone else’s.” Obviously, Kierkegaard is speaking of the ideal here. Who can possibly completely forget his own sufferings, miseries, and losses in the midst of caring for others in the midst of their sufferings, miseries, and losses? No one. Nevertheless, this is what the truly loving person pursues. Kierkegaard goes on to say that there “is one who is thinking about him” while he is pursuing forgetting about himself: “God in heaven.” And since “God is love,” this also means that “love is thinking of him... The self-lover [who lacks authentic love] is busy; he shouts and makes a big noise and stands on his rights in order to make sure he is not forgotten—and yet he is forgotten”—by God at the judgment as one to whom he will grant mercy and eternal life, because he is so full of himself that he believes he deserves God’s mercy. “But the one who loves, who forgets himself, is recollected by love”—by God at the judgment as one to whom God will grant eternal mercy.

Also, “[n]ote the redoubling here: the one who loves is or becomes what he does.” Put another way, Kierkegaard says that as a rule “what I give the other receives,” but “love is always redoubled in itself.” The biblically loving person gives love, and he receives love from God and becomes loving himself. “This holds true also when it is said that loves hides a multitude of sins.”

“In Scripture we read, and these are *Love’s* own words, that many sins are forgiven one who loved much—because the love in him hides a multitude of sins” (a reference to 1 Peter 4:8). But here, in this book *Works of Love*, “we are considering love in its outward direction” and so in this sense Kierkegaard will discuss the statements, “*Love hides a multitude of sins. It does not discover sins; but not to discover what still must be there, insofar as it can be discovered—that is hiding.*”

“The term ‘multitude’ is in itself indefinite...depending on who the speaker is.” Someone who has traveled little knows only the “multitude” of a few things. Someone who has traveled extensively knows a “multitude” of very many things. By having actually experienced many new discoveries over the course of his travels, the latter is more aware that his discoveries can become “greater and greater and can continually become even greater... —The same is true of the multitude of sins. The phrase means something very different, depending on who the speaker is.” The person who has not only extensively encountered the sins of others but also become aware of the depth and breadth of his own sins will more intensely feel the weight of the phrase “multitude of sins”—that his discoveries of his and others’ sins can become greater and greater.

Certainly it is easy to see that “one *discovers* the multitude of sins” in other people “to be continually greater and greater.” We all are very adept at picking out what is wrong in others. We can see the “multitude of sins” in them, and this is right in line with what the world values. We look around at the world and we see that “discovering is praised and admired.” For example, the scientist who discovers a cure for a horrible disease or the astronomer who discovers a new planet, both are praised for their new discoveries.

“On the other hand, one who does not discover something or who discovers nothing is rated very low... So, then, it is certainly easy to see that the one who loves, who discovers nothing, makes a very poor showing in the eyes of the world.” To be shrewd and observant—“even with regard to evil, with regard to sin and the multitude of sins”—“is highly regarded in the world.” Sherlock Holmes, the greatest sleuth of all times, used his powers of observation to detect clues that others overlooked, and the world ever since has praised him for it to the extent that readers sent letters to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and asked him to pass them on to Holmes. Kierkegaard also comments on how the world is always so eager to learn of all the evil that has been discovered in others. In our day, we note the number of television shows and movies depicting unspeakable crimes and horrendous evil, and yet they draw huge audiences who can become mesmerized by them—as long as the television hero prevails and saves the day!

But what about “the one who loves”? He is the opposite. “Whether he is laughed at, whether he is mocked, whether he is pitied, and no matter what the world says about him, it is certain that with regard to the multitude of sins he *discovers* nothing, not even that laughter, that mockery, that pity” that the world is sending his way. “We do distinguish between discovering that is the conscious and deliberate effort to find and [simply] seeing or hearing that can occur against one’s will.” Kierkegaard is referring to the difference between intentionally looking for other people’s sins and seeing them because of our natural abilities to discern good and evil. The former occurs because of a deliberate choice to find out what evil lies in people. The latter happens spontaneously because of how God has designed us as moral beings to distinguish good from evil; but “deep down inside we have a respect for [the one who loves] because he, resting in and absorbed in his love, discovers nothing.” The loving one intentionally avoids seeking to figure out just how evil people are and what are their faults. He “hides the multitude of sins that could be found through discovery” by refusing to snoop around in people’s lives just to find out what evil they have committed. “What the world admires as sagacity is knowledge of evil—whereas wisdom is knowledge of the good. The one who loves does not have and does not want to have knowledge of evil.” He is content to know only what he casually picks up in the natural course of his relationships with others. He does not have to pry into their lives.

“But at the basis of all *understanding* lies first and foremost an *understanding* between the one who is to understand and that which is to be understood. Therefore knowledge of evil...still has an *understanding* of evil.” Here Kierkegaard acknowledges that it is impossible for human beings not to have some understanding of evil while also pursuing avoiding knowing evil. We are designed by God to be moral beings who understand the difference between right and wrong, but what God wants us to avoid is choosing to experience evil. The latter is *knowledge* of evil, while the former is merely *understanding* of evil. We know that murder is wrong even if we have never murdered. We know that adultery is wrong even if we have never been unfaithful to our spouse. We know that stealing is wrong even if we have never taken something that does not belong to us.

Nevertheless, we are tempted to be curious, to use our curiosity about evil to find out about others’ evil and faults. “But watch out, because if one in curiosity gives evil a little

finger, it soon takes the whole hand.” This curious one soon becomes one who “discovers the multitude of sins as greater and greater around him.” Plus, even if he is not led to commit the same evil that he observes in others, “[n]ow he discovers sin even where he himself knows it does not exist; he discovers it with the aid of fabrication, of slander, of defamation, and of lies, which he practices for such a long time that he himself finally believes it. Such a person has discovered the multitude of sins!” Thus, our curiosity affords us the opportunity to compare ourselves with others in order to claim that we are better than they are—even if we have to make up lies about them and, thus, hide from our own sin.

“But the one who loves discovers nothing” evil in others. He “looks like a deranged person” who “with his eyes open cannot see what is taking place right in front of him,” because he chooses not to see the evil. “Just imagine, to mention the highest example, imagine Christ in that moment when he was brought before the Council; imagine the raging crowd; imagine the circle of dignitaries—and then imagine how many a glance was directed at him, aimed at him, only waiting for him to look in that direction so that its glance could also convey its mockery, its contempt, its pity, its scorn for the accused! But he discovered nothing; lovingly he hid the multitude of sins... He is the prototype; the one who loves has learned from him when he discovers nothing and in this way hides the multitude of sins,” when he like Christ chooses to be forsaken and despised and to bear his cross while lovingly discovering nothing wrong in those who have wronged him. In this way, we can understand that “mockery and derision actually do not harm if the one derided is not damaged by *discovering*, that is, by becoming embittered; if he becomes embittered, he discovers the multitude of sins” as he harbors resentment because of the pain that others have caused him.

Next, Kierkegaard writes that, “*Love hides a multitude of sins; what it cannot avoid seeing or hearing, it hides by silence, by a mitigating explanation, by forgiveness,*” and he goes on to describe these three methods of hiding the multitude of sins.

First, love hides a multitude of sins *by silence*. “Does not the one who tells his neighbor’s faults and sins increase the multitude of sins?” How does he do this? By exposing sins that love would not have done. Kierkegaard exhorts his reader not to “deal too light-mindedly with this knowledge of the neighbor’s faults, as if everything were all right if only it is definite that what is being told is true.” Just because the one who is talking about another person’s sins is telling the truth, if indeed he really is, the truth in this case is not the right thing to be telling. “It corrupts people to become accustomed through rumor or gossip to finding out, inquisitively, frivolously, enviously, perhaps maliciously, about the neighbor’s faults.” Our natural born sinfulness exploits the finding out about other people’s sins. Very rarely will we handle such information with love. Instead we delight a little too much in the knowledge of our neighbor’s sins and turn it into an opportunity to look down our noses at them with self-righteousness and arrogance. “It would certainly be desirable if people would again learn to be silent; but if there is to be chatter, and inquisitive and frivolous chatter at that, then let it be about nonsense and trivialities... [T]he one who by telling the neighbor’s faults helps to corrupt people is of course increasing the multitude of sins” by saying more than he should about his neighbor.

“It is only all too certain that every human being, unfortunately, has a great inclination to see his neighbor’s faults and perhaps an even greater one to want to tell them.” There is a definite “enticement to be able to tell something evil about the neighbor, to be able momentarily to obtain an attentive audience by means of such an entertaining story.” We might even want to ask if “any criminal [is] as fundamentally depraved as such a person, even if it were the case that the evil told was true?” At least the criminal would more likely admit that what he is doing is wrong, unless he is a psychopath who completely



lacks the strength of conscience to sense his own guilt. Ironically, how many gossips who delight in spreading the news about others' sins and faults also seem to lack a consciousness of their own guilt that should prevent them from engaging in such immoral and unloving behavior?

"In the Lord's Prayer we pray that God will not lead us into temptation, but if it should happen, indeed, if it should happen that I fall into temptation—merciful God, yet one favor, that my sin and my guilt might be such that the world rightly sees it as abominable and shocking." But the most horrible thing that could happen is that a person incurs more and more guilt as he tells more and more evil about his neighbor, but he does not become aware of it because his whole environment, the world's craving for information about others' sins, strengthens the illusion that what he was doing "was nothing [wrong], that it not only was not guilt but was almost meritorious." The world says that he ought to be rewarded for being so forthright about other people's evil actions. After all, does not the public have the right to know everything about everybody, whether rich or poor, famous or infamous, in positions of power or powerless. This is why professional athletes come under the closest scrutiny—because the fans pay their salaries by purchasing tickets in order to watch them. Indeed, the fans own them. These athletes are their property. Therefore, they deserve to know everything about them.

"Ah, there are crimes that the world does not call crimes, that it rewards and almost honors—and yet, yet I would rather, God forbid, arrive in eternity with three repented murders on my conscience than as a retired slanderer with this dreadful, incalculable load of crime that had piled up year after year, that may have spread on an almost inconceivable scale, put people into their graves, embittered the most intimate relationships, violated the most innocent sympathizers, defiled the immature, led astray and corrupted both young and old...—the dread load of crime of which I never had the time to begin to repent because the time had to be used for new crimes, and because the innumerability of those crimes had secured for me money, influence, almost esteem, and above all a pleasurable life!"

"Say, then, whether it is not true that by being silent about the neighbor's faults the one who loves hides a multitude of sins, if you consider how by telling his faults one increases the multitude of sins." We know in our hearts that Kierkegaard is right. However, are we willing to agree explicitly and stop our enjoyable practice of gossip?

Second, loves hides a multitude of sins by *mitigating explanation*. "It is always the explanation that makes something what it now becomes. The fact or the facts are basic, but the explanation is the decisive factor." The "explanation makes the object of the explanation what it becomes." In addition, there is always the possibility of "a diversity of explanations." Therefore, "it is always in my power, if I am the one who loves, to choose the most lenient explanation." For example, I could leave out some of the details that are not relevant to my present conversation about someone who has done what is wrong. Or I could provide information about his personal history that helps people understand how his circumstances may have contributed to the improper decision that he made. This "mitigating explanation" reduces the multitude of sins by removing, to a degree, the guilt of the one who has done evil. I do not expose all that I could about him, or I provide helpful background information. Thus, in the other person's eyes, he is not as guilty as he actually is—because of love.

"Ah, if people would rightly understand what beautiful use they could make of their imagination, their acumen, their inventiveness, their power to put things together, by using it to find, if possible, a mitigating explanation—then they would gain more and more of a taste for one of the most beautiful joys in life." Like a skillful hunter who gains more and more experience each year that he hunts, he also gains more and more passion for hunting. There is certainly nothing wrong in acquiring additional experience

and passion in this example of one of life's many enjoyable pursuits. And while we consider "it as an onerous but yet in another regard also a satisfying and fascinating task to be a servant of justice who discovers guilt and crime," here, too, we understand there is nothing wrong in this pursuit either. "We are amazed at such a person's acquaintance with the human heart" and with the evil that the human heart can produce through all sorts of criminal acts. We praise this servant of justice who does not miss a clue, who considers every evil thought and option that the criminal engaged in while pursuing him until he arrests him. "Should it not be just as satisfying, just as fascinating, to discover" our neighbors' faults and make them known to the world? Certainly evil is evil, and its discovery and exposure is always good and right, whether by the police and their detective work or by the neighbor and his own careful scrutiny.

But let "the judge appointed by the state" and any "servant of justice work at discovering guilt and crime." This is their job and benefit to society, to bring about justice where it is good and appropriate and right. The "rest of us are called to be neither judges nor servants of justice, but on the contrary are called by God to love, that is, with the aid of a mitigating explanation to hide a multitude of sins." We are individuals in individual and private relationships with other people, while the government is the public sector. "See, the state appoints judges and servants of justice to discover and punish evil." This is their God-given responsibility according to the apostle Paul in Romans 13, "There is no government authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (NAS95). "In other matters people unite" by forming private charitable organizations, "and this is indeed praiseworthy, to alleviate poverty, to bring up orphan children, to rescue the fallen." Unfortunately, however, for this "beautiful enterprise" of lovingly hiding a multitude of sins with a mitigating and less than complete explanation of other people's wrongdoings "no association has as yet been organized!"

Kierkegaard has also already explained in two previous chapters that "the two chief means that love...uses for the mitigating explanation that hides a multitude of sins" are by "believing all things in love and hoping all things in love." The loving person does not worry about being deceived by the liar, because he is willing to let God sort it all out at the judgment. Thus, he hides a multitude of sins. The loving person also hopes for the good, the eternal good, for others and does not worry if his hope is never fulfilled, because it is better to hope for the good than to have one's expectations fulfilled. Thus, he hides a multitude of sins by being willing to wait until the judgment to find out exactly what the outcome of a person's sins will be—mercy or justice.

Third, love hides a multitude of sins by *forgiveness*. "Keeping silent does not actually take away" from what is generally known by all to be sin. "The mitigating explanation" does not keep everyone from knowing what sin or sins actually exist, but forgiveness "removes what cannot be denied to be sin. Thus love strives in every way to hide a multitude of sins, but forgiveness is the most notable way."

A scientist who is looking at nature *discovers* the multiplicity of the creation, that there is a vast amount of the creation that exists. The person who is not a scientist never knows all that the scientist knows. Nevertheless, just because "the ignorant person does not know that this or that exists," it does not mean that it does not exist. "It is not removed from nature by his ignorance; by his ignorance it simply does not exist for him." It is different with forgiveness. "[F]orgiveness takes the forgiven sin away."

Here Kierkegaard is talking about the relationship between sin, forgiveness, and faith, and at first his explanation is rather confusing. "I *believe* that what is seen [i.e., the world] has come into existence from what is not seen [i.e., God has created the world out of nothing]. I see the world, but what is not seen [i.e., any part of the world that is not immediately in my [purview] I do not see; that I believe." But what is the unseen in the relationship between sin, forgiveness, and faith? "The unseen is that forgiveness takes

away that which does indeed exist; the unseen is that what is seen is nevertheless not seen." This sounds a bit contradictory, does it not? How can what is seen not be seen? Kierkegaard goes on to explain, "The one who loves sees the sin he forgives, but he believes that forgiveness takes it away." In what way does this happen? Just as the believer in God as the creator believes that what he does not see, the rest of the world, exists, so also "the one who loves by forgiveness *believes away* what is seen," the sin. Both are examples of true biblical faith. "Blessed is the believer, he believes what he cannot see; blessed is the one who loves, he believes away that which he indeed can see!" By his forgiveness of the sin that has taken place, he has removed it from his need to see it.

"Who can believe this? The one who loves can do it" by the grace of God. "But why is forgiveness so rare?" Because it is so hard, and we think of all sorts of excuses not to forgive. We say, "I would like to forgive him, but I do not see how it can help." However, if anyone has ever needed forgiveness, then he knows how this is to speak very naïvely and unlovingly of forgiveness. We forget how God sometimes uses forgiveness as part of the very miracle of bringing about faith in the one who needs forgiveness. Thus, love should realize that there is always this possibility of faith and should use forgiveness as another means to "hide the multitude of sins" and, thus, direct the forgiven person towards God and his forgiveness.

Kierkegaard alludes to Isaiah 38:7 where King Hezekiah prays to God, "It is you who has kept my soul from the pit of nothingness, for you have cast all my sins behind your back." Then he explains this imagery of putting something behind one's back. "Forgetting, when God does it in relation to sin, is the opposite of creating, since to create is to bring forth from nothing, and to forget is to take back into nothing. What is hidden from my eyes, that I have never seen; but what is hidden behind my back, that I have seen." God is the ultimate realist. He sees our sin, because nothing escapes his notice, especially since he is the creator of all things. Then, when he forgives, he hides sin, that which he has seen, behind his back. He chooses not to make the sinner pay what he owes his justice and be punished eternally for his sins. Human beings should forgive each other similarly. "The one who loves forgives in this way; he forgives, he forgets, he blots out the sin, in love he turns toward the one he forgives; but when he turns toward him, he of course cannot see what is lying behind his back." Like God he does not require that the one who has sinned against him be punished eternally. While it is easy not to see what is behind one's back, it is very difficult "to become the loving one who with the help of forgiveness puts another's" sin and guilt behind his back and thus "hides a multitude of sins." How true is this! Every time you see someone who has hurt you deeply, is not the first thing you think of their cruel actions and your own pain? At that very moment, to put their sin behind your back and act towards them in a forgiving way is certainly very difficult. Perhaps, over time, hiding others' sin becomes easier, but only by understanding that God has put our sins behind his back on the basis of our contrition and Christ's death. Thereby, we can we learn to do the same for others.

Kierkegaard goes on to agree with our instincts that unpunished sin "cries to people or to God for punishment." Because God has instilled his own sense of justice within us, we all believe that it is good and right to punish someone who commits a horrible crime. In addition, the unpunished sin looks "much greater than when the same sin is forgiven. Is this merely an optical illusion? No, it is actually so." Consider a wound that looks ghastly until the physician washes and dresses it. The wound looks much less appalling once the physician has performed his skillful work. The one "who denies forgiveness" is not tending to the wound. He makes the wound of the sin "seem greater." Similarly, "forgiveness denies the sin of life" by washing and dressing the wound. "[B]ut to deny forgiveness provides the sin with sustenance." Not only does the sin look even more

appalling when it is not forgiven, but the denial of forgiveness, which itself is sin, just adds sin to sin and makes it greater. Thus, “the one who loves...hides the multitude of sins” by making the sin smaller in all respects by forgiving it and hiding it behind his back.

Kierkegaard now comments on the last key idea of this chapter, “*Love hides a multitude of sins, because love prevents the sin from coming into existence, smothers it at birth.*” He says that sin needs an “occasion” in order to become sin and that it “takes its occasion from the commandment,” referring to the apostle Paul’s discussion of the Mosaic Covenant in Romans 7. The commandments of this covenant that God made with the Jews, such as “You shall not covet,” should constrain sin by informing the sinner of what God requires so that he can choose to obey. Instead, this specific commandment, “You shall not covet,” becomes “the occasion” for sin to manifest itself. Our inward evil desires are always there, but we self-deceivingly hide from them. Thus, they remain hidden even to the sinner. He is not cognizant of just how deep the problem of sin is within him. In “an even more lamentable sense, the sin in others is the occasion that occasions the sin in the one who comes in touch with them. Oh, how often a thoughtlessly, frivolously tossed-off remark has been sufficient to provide the sin an occasion! How often a wanton glance has been the occasion for an enlargement of the multitude of sin! Not to mention what a rich occasion there is for sin” for one who constantly surrounds himself with those people who constantly tempt him to sin.

“But there is one environment that unconditionally does not give and is not occasion for sin—that is love. When the sin in a person is surrounded by love, it is outside its element”—like an alcoholic in a rehabilitation facility, cut off from his sources to alcohol and working through his addiction. Certainly it is true “that sin can take love as an occasion, can become furious at it, can rage against it.” Yet, hopefully in the long run “sin cannot hold out against love”—if God graciously works in the person who is rebelling against love. The government has to devise extreme means to keep criminals imprisoned, and “the physician” has to use “coercive means to control an insane person, but in connection with sin there are no surroundings as controlling...as love. How often has anger” that was waiting for an occasion been smothered by love? “How often has the evil desire” not found an occasion for external manifestation in the face of love? How often has “the vexation of the soul,” anxiety and fear, experienced abatement in the midst of love, especially God’s sovereign love? Love can soothe and calm even the worst conceit and arrogance. “Blessed be the loving one who by withholding the occasion hides a multitude of sins!”

## Chapter VI

### Love Abides

Kierkegaard has already spoken many times of the concepts of change and eternity. True biblical love never changes. It looks to eternity for its *raison d'être*, which means that eternity must change the person who will be able to love. It must change him from someone whose love will change over time into someone whose love lasts for eternity—like God's love. In this chapter, the message is no different—eternal change of a person prevents temporal change of his love. The poet is very aware of the temporal change of love and makes his living off it. The Bible is even more aware and rejoices in the eternal changelessness of true love, if the person himself has been eternally changed—because his love is independent of time and dependent on only the eternal, on God.

Once again, Kierkegaard draws from the apostle Paul and 1 Corinthians 13—“But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (v. 13). Therefore, “Love Abides” is the title of our chapter, and as we have seen before, Kierkegaard will present us with the ideal while also being very practical, but we should not get discouraged by the high standard (indeed the nearly impossible standard) that he sets for love. Instead, as he says in the first two sentences of the chapter, we should strive to do “the good” that we are willing to do. However, Kierkegaard has previously hinted that such striving is possible only if God miraculously changes our hearts so that our fundamental desire is to choose “the good.” “Yes, praise God, love abides! Then whatever the world may take away from you, though it be the most cherished, then whatever may happen to you in life, however you may come to suffer in your striving for the good that you will, if people turn indifferently away from you or against you as enemies, if everyone disowns you or is ashamed to admit what he owed to you, if even your best friend were to deny you—yet if in any of your strivings, in any of your actions, in any of your words you truly have had love as your confidant, take comfort, because love abides.”

A confidant is your closest friend who shares and keeps all your secrets. Kierkegaard is saying that if love, i.e., God, fills this role in your life, then your love will abide—forever, and nothing can come between you and love. Neither “things present nor things to come, neither angels or devils, nor praise God, your own troubled mind's fearful thoughts will be able to take it away from you, neither at the stormiest and most difficult moment of your life nor at the last moment of your life.” The reason is “because love abides.”

Even if “despondency,” dejection, depression, and hopelessness flood into your heart and mind and “make you weak, so that you lose the desire to will rightly...; when despondency wants to make everything empty for you, to transform all life into monotonous and meaningless repetition,” then you might still see everything around you, but you see it all with an eye of indifference. It all means nothing to you in the pit of your despondency. In addition, “you know that God is, but it seems to you as if he had withdrawn into himself, as if he were far off in heaven, infinitely far away from all this triviality that is scarcely worth living for.” In this wretched and miserable state, what you need to “bear in mind” is “that love abides!” It does so because love “is in the future” just as much as “it is in the present.” Whichever of these two you need for comfort, each is “equally certain.” Therefore, you should “[m]eet all the terrors of the future with this comfort” and “all the anxiety...of the present with this comfort: love abides.”

Of course, ultimately, “we are speaking of that love that sustains all existence, God's love,” which does not come from us. We cannot manufacture it in ourselves or for ourselves. Neither are we ourselves love. No, only God is love, pure love. It is his love

for us and his working in us that abides. Our love that is strictly human will not last. It will wither away and not abide. Only God is eternal, and he abides—forever. Therefore, his love also abides, and his love abides in us in order that our love for him and for others might abide.

“But in this little work we are continually dealing only with the works of love,” with how we do love towards others, including God, “and therefore not with God’s love but with human love.” As I just said and as Kierkegaard repeats, “Naturally no human being is love; he is, if he is in love, one who loves.” If he is abiding in God’s love by God’s loving abiding in him through his grace and mercy, then he, in Kierkegaard’s words, is “in love.” He is living and acting within the love that truly abides, which is God’s love within him, and which means that love is wherever he is, the one who is “in love.”

As Kierkegaard also pointed out in a previous chapter, we tend to think of love “between human beings” as “a relationship between two.” More accurately, though, when a person is “in love,” his love is “a relationship among three. First, there is the one who loves, next the one or the ones who are the object; but love itself is the third.” In other words, God is the middle term in all human relationships where true love actually exists. Thus, the person who loves God also loves others, and his love becomes “an active work,” whether or not he is doing anything of an external nature as Kierkegaard will go on to explain.

Now he dives into the first of two major statements in this chapter:

*Love never falls away—it abides.*

In this first statement, Kierkegaard is referring to a break that suddenly takes place in a relationship—like water that backs up against a dam, and then suddenly the dam can stand the pressure no longer and it gives way. In the same way, the pressure of some problem in a relationship builds and builds until at least one person cannot take it any longer, and the relationship suddenly and irrevocably crumbles. Kierkegaard’s explanations of both his major statements in this chapter revolve around the concept of waiting—waiting for someone to love you the way you would love to be loved. We can only wonder how much his failed relationship, a relationship he broke off, with his fiancée, Regine Olsen, figures into his examples. It is generally believed that the two deeply loved each other, but, after proposing to her, Kierkegaard became disillusioned about his ability to love her well within the context of marriage. He comments in his journals that his tendency towards depression made him unsuitable for marriage, but his specific motive for ending the engagement remains obscure. Perhaps portions of his examples are the reverse of his own story. “When a girl in love foresees that there will be great and perhaps prolonged difficulties in the way of her union with her beloved, she says to him, ‘Wait for me,’ and her beloved does as asked,” because, at least for a while, he is willing to wait until she is prepared to love him the way he wants to be loved.

“It is indeed very beautiful and praiseworthy to wait in this way for another, but whether it is exactly love that does it, we have not yet seen.” In other words, the girl does not yet know if the young man is waiting for her with a love that abides. “Perhaps the prospects for union with the young girl became so remote that her beloved [says], ‘No, I cannot wait for you any longer; I owe it to myself and to my life not to put it off this way year after year in uncertainty.’” His love eventually falls away, because it does not abide.

Whether or not love will abide in such a situation is “often the subject” of people’s conversations and certainly “is most often the principal content of all the poets’ tales.” Even the poet presents abiding love as praiseworthy and the love that ceases as disgraceful. “The point is that” true love, i.e., biblical love, “cannot cease to be loving; if one is truly loving, then one remains that; if one ceases to *be* that, then one never *was* that,” which means that love “has a retroactive power,” which “is something infinitely profound. For example, a man may have had money, and when it is gone, when he no

longer has money, it still remains just as certain and true that he *has had* money. But when one ceases to be loving, he *has never been loving either*.”

In addition, when “love ceases, when in erotic love” or “friendship” love ceases, “then the two, as we human beings say, break up.” Love was that which bound the two people together, but then love goes away and so does the bond. The relationship ends, and there “comes a break”—what we typically call a divorce in the context of marriage.

“Christianity, however, does not know this use of language, does not understand it, refuses to understand it,” and the reason Christianity is different is because it does not recognize “only a relationship between two” persons. Instead, it sees that there “is a relationship among three—a human being, God, and a human being. Typically, if two people “agree about breaking with each other, then of course there is no objection whatever to it,” which also does not mean that the two cannot love others. They just cannot love each other. “They retain the characteristic of being loving, but now their love finds a place only in relation to others.” But love can be this way only in the world. “[I]n an eternal sense it can never be that way.”

Christianity always sees things in the light of eternity. God’s promise of mercy and forgiveness is not just for the present life. It ultimately is for the next. God’s project is not to create happiness and a complete sense of well-being in this life. It is to create a people for himself who will live in the eternal kingdom of God, which he will bring about in a new creation after the current one (cf. Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:10-13). Therefore, Christianity’s “earnestness promptly concentrates eternity’s attention upon the single individual, upon each single one of the two” people who are in a loving relationship with one another. Thus, it sees each one as relating himself “separately to *love*.” Then, if there is a break in their relationship,” obviously “one must *fall away from love*. This is the important point.” Therefore, Christianity does not refer to two people who experience a break in their relationship but with each single individual’s falling away from *love*. To speak of a break in their relationship has the hallmarks “far too much of the busyness of temporality, as if the matter were then not very important; but to fall away from *love*—these words have the earnestness of eternity.” In addition, “to fall away from *love*” is “the highest price” that really no one should want to pay, because ultimately it means falling away from God.

“But the one who truly loves never falls away from *love*; for him, therefore, it can never come to a break, because love abides.” Even if there is a break, in a worldly sense, “the one who loves still does not fall away from *love*.” Therefore, his abiding in love means that “the break can never really take place.” He “is in covenant with the eternal” and, by being so, “maintains the upper hand over the past.” The past has led to a break in the relationship. Something happened between the two people that eventually meant that they could not love one another any longer, or at least that one of them could not love the other. Therefore, in a worldly sense, the only thing that they could do was to break up. Their relationship of love came to an end, but the one who remains committed to the eternal, to God, to obtaining eternal life through his unmerited mercy, “transforms what in and through the past is a break into a possible relationship in the future. Seen from the angle of the past, the break becomes more and more obvious with each day and each year; but the loving one, who abides, indeed belongs by his abiding to the future, the eternal, and from the angle of the future the break is not a break but a possibility. The one who loves sees that there is a possibility for reconciliation either in this realm or in the next. But that requires the powers of eternity, and therefore the loving one, who abides, must abide in *love*; otherwise the past gradually acquires the power and little by little the break comes into view.” However, if the person truly abides in love, then “the powers of eternity...transform the past” into the possibility that the future may bring restoration to the relationship. But only eternity and abiding have such power.

In spite of his rather thorough explanation so far, Kierkegaard still feels that he must “describe this work of love.” Therefore, he dives into his topic of a break in a relationship even more deeply. “So it came to a break between the two.” However it happened, it happened, and, while there is a break, “the one who loves says, ‘I abide’—thus there still is no break. Think of a compound word,” i.e., a hyphenated word, such as “long-term.” What if the last word is missing? There is only the first word and the hyphen. Kierkegaard says that if you have only the first word and the hyphen, then you will say that the word is not finished and something is lacking. “It is the same with the one who loves.” While there was a break in the relationship and all one can see is the past, i.e., the first term of the compound word, “the one who loves does not want to know the past, because he abides, and to abide is in the direction of the future”—beyond the hyphen to what is missing. The relationship “has not yet been finished,” he will say, because it still needs the other word on the right side of the hyphen. It still needs eternity and love, which abides.

Again Kierkegaard says, “So it came to a break. It was a quarrel that separated the two; yet one of them made the break, saying ‘It is finished between us.’ But the one who loves abides, saying, ‘It is not all finished between us; we are still in the middle of the sentence [to switch metaphors]; it is only the sentence that is not finished... When from the angle of the past” we look at the break in the relationship, we can say that it is finished. However, “from the angle of the future” and especially eternity, we can say that the relationship is not finished; something is still missing—because love abides into eternity where all breaks in relationships will disappear for those who are abiding in God’s love in the present realm.

Again Kierkegaard says, “So it came to a break. It was dejection, coldness, indifference, that separated them, yet one of them made the break, saying, ‘I am not speaking with that person anymore; I do not see him.’ But the one who loves says, ‘I abide; in this way we are still speaking with each other, since silence belongs in conversation at times.’” This concept is absolutely brilliant. Here Kierkegaard is being the ultimate realist. Everyone experiences silence at some time in his relationships with others. Therefore, while the unloving person may view the break and silence as the end of his relationship with someone else, the loving person views them only as a continuation of the same relationship. The silence is not the end of the relationship. It is simply part of the eternal conversation that he is having with the other person. And it does not matter how long the silence has already lasted. Even if there has been silence for three years, such silence is of no concern to love that abides. “If you saw two people sitting silent together and you knew nothing else, would you from that conclude that it was three years since they had spoken with each other? Can anyone determine how long the silence must last before it can be said that now there is no more conversation?” Obviously not. In this case, “the past has no power at all.” Indeed, “the one who loves, who abides, continually” frees himself from his knowledge of the past and, therefore, “is only waiting for the future.” He does not allow the past (no matter how hurtful, no matter how painful, no matter how much the other person has made him suffer) to rule over him and keep him from being a person in whom love abides—for the sake of eternity.

In the light of all of this, Kierkegaard practically shouts, “Get rid of the past, drown it in the oblivion of eternity by abiding in love—then the end is the beginning, and there is no break! When the faithless one abandoned the girl, but every evening ‘in the gloaming time of sunset glow’ she sits by the window and waits, she is expressing every evening: Now he is coming; he is coming very soon. Every evening it seems as if there was no break, because she abides.” Her constant, eager expectation of his reappearing is testimony to her immersing her love in eternity. How can her love end and not abide if eternity never ends?



But if she “desired the union with her beloved for her own sake,” then “she is sure to become weary,” which will happen if her love is not governed by eternity and, therefore, does not abide. If her love is only a worldly and romantic love, then the past and the break in her relationship with her beloved will have too strong an effect on her. When she thinks of how long it has been since he left her, she “becomes attentive to the past.” Thus, the past, instead of eternity, could easily begin to take control of her thinking, making her weary of waiting—unless love abides.

Again Kierkegaard says, “So it came to a break, whatever the occasion was; one of them broke the relationship. It was terrible; hate, endless, irreconcilable hate would fill his soul in the future. ‘I will never see that person anymore; our paths are forever separated; the chasmic abyss of hate is between us’... He carefully dodges so that his path and that of the hated one do not cross. For him the world is almost too small to hold both of them. For him it is agony to breathe in the same world where the hated one breathes. He shudders at the thought that eternity will again hold both of them.” Thus, the one who hates has fallen away from love. “But the one who loves abides,” and, because his love abides, then he can say that the one who hates him and he are still on the same path together to eternity. As a result, “the one who loves does not want to know the past.” He knows that delving into and reminding himself of the past will only disappoint him and embitter him towards the one who hates him. Instead, “he abides, he abides on the path with the one who hates him; thus there is still no break”—even though the one who hates him has broken off the relationship with him.

“What marvelous strength love has!” The most powerful words that have ever been spoken were God’s words in Genesis 1, “Let there be...” To bring into existence out of nothing the entire cosmos required a power that transcends any that we see naturally in our world. It required the power of the transcendent and eternal God who continues to cause the cosmos to exist by this same creative power. “But the most powerful words any human being has spoken are ‘I abide’ when said by one who loves... As truly as he is the one who loves, there is no misunderstanding that sooner or later will not be obliged to give up and yield to his abiding—if not before, then in eternity.” That “if time cannot” conquer a misunderstanding and the hate that results, “at least eternity” will, which is what the person who loves hopes. Therefore, his “love never falls away—it abides.”

Next, Kierkegaard tackles the second major statement of this chapter:

*Love abides—it never wastes away.*

While the first statement, *Love never falls away*, concerned itself with a sudden break in a relationship, this second statement pertains to the result or effect that long periods of time have on a relationship. However, the issue is still the same, that of waiting, waiting for someone, who is not being as loving as a person would like him to be, finally to change and to love as expected and hoped. The problem is that time is the enemy of love. “People have strength enough for the moment, but over the duration of time they become” bankrupt in their love. Just as a business tends to run out of money in an economic depression, so does an individual tend to run out the will to love when his expectations for being loved are never met. While this love may not have *fallen away* (as Kierkegaard described in the previous section), time may cause “a change we call *wasting away*”—unless of course we are talking about true love that endures all the tests of time and abides.

“For a moment, let us speak of something that occupies people very much, erotic [romantic] love, or that girl who, in the words of the poet, every evening sits at the window ‘in the gloaming time of sunset glow’ and waits for the beloved, ‘alas,’ while ‘time comes and time goes.’” The girl was not so conscious of time that she kept track of how long she had been waiting. She “did not mark how time came and time went.” Instead,

“[o]ut of sympathy for the expectant girl, time undertook, as it were, to do what the faithless one should have done. When the time came when *he* should have come, time came, but *he* did not come; then time went again until the time came when it was the time *he* should come who did not come. In this way, time lulled the expectant girl by coming and going, until she, rocked in this movement, rested in expectancy.” She became so used to waiting that it was as though she was asleep in the midst of it. “If you have lain down to sleep and while you are asleep someone suddenly turned on a powerful high-gushing fountain, you would wake up terrified. But if you lie down to rest by a fountain—never have you slept more sweetly, never more coolly, never more deliciously than when lulled by the splashing of the fountain!” In the same way, the girl was lulled by time’s coming and going into a sleepy love that was fading away, because it lacked the vital characteristic of abiding.

“So time came and time went. The girl truly did not fall away from her love, but she did fade away.” There was no sudden break in her relationship with her beloved. Instead, her love slowly and almost imperceptibly faded away. Time did not fade away, because it came and went. Instead, the girl faded away in her love—“a sacrifice to erotic love. Yet this is the highest thing that can be said of any human being”—that he has sacrificed himself for the sake of love. However, the question is whether or not the girl sacrificed herself for the highest cause? She did not if she “was sacrificed to erotic love,” because erotic love is not the highest love; and erotic love caused her to fade away—“lovely in death as she had been in life,” because she was marked by erotic love instead of eternal love. “Erotic love is a desire for this life; therefore time had power over her, and therefore she faded away in love until it, too, faded away, although she still showed that she had power over time, for she did not fall away from erotic love.” There was never a complete break in her relationship with her beloved, but over time her love still faded away, because it was only romantic love. Certainly she never completely gave up on her beloved. She only “faded away.”

Nevertheless, true love abides and never “wastes away” or fades away. “In spiritual love itself is the spring that flows into an eternal life. That the one who loves [like this] also ages over the years and dies in time demonstrates nothing, because his love still remains eternally young. In his love he does not relate himself to temporality, is not dependent on temporality, as the relationship in erotic love.” He does not give in to the possible effects of time in the present world where people easily become discouraged when they experience rejection or hurt time after time. He does not allow the many disappointments in the current realm’s relationships to affect him adversely, because he realizes that “eternity is the proper season for his love,” and eternity lasts forever. “When he dies, he is right at his goal; when he dies, it simply becomes apparent that he did not wait in vain,” because it was perfectly alright with him that his expectation for his beloved never be fulfilled. He was not waiting for what had to happen in time. He was willing to wait, if necessary, for eternity. In contrast, “when the young girl died, we simply said: Unfortunately it appears that she waited in vain”—because her love wasted away and faded away.

However, “[c]an immortality waste away?” Obviously not, because immortality is eternity, and love that abides is what “gives the human being immortality,” i.e., God’s love that abides for the sinner who with contrition appeals to God for mercy and is granted eternal life. On the other hand, erotic and romantic love is “the invention of temporality, temporality’s most beautiful but nonetheless frail invention.” Certainly, “there is no fault in the girl; she was and remained faithful to her erotic love. Yet, her love changed somewhat over the years. That is the nature of erotic love.” Yet, eternal love is different. It does not change. It cannot waste away. It abides, which explains the sadness in the girl’s sacrifice. She sacrificed herself for temporality instead of for

eternity. She sacrificed herself for the inspiration of the poet instead of for the truth of God.

“The young girl faded away. Even if *he* had come, that is, had come before her death, it still would have been too late. She did abide, but time had weakened in her the desire by which she lived, while the same desire still consumed her. In contrast, the one who loves in the most profound sense [the eternal sense], who abides, does not waste away; his love does not corrode. If someone who misunderstood him, if someone who became cold toward him, if someone who hated him returns, he will find him unchanged, unchanged with the same longing for the eternal and with the same quiet composure in the temporal. His love is eternal, relates itself to eternity, rests in the eternal. Therefore *at every moment* he is waiting for the same thing he is waiting for *eternally*, and therefore without restlessness, because in eternity there is time enough.”

“If love’s expectancy” is able to make a human being’s love waste away, it must be because it is dependent upon time “so that time has the power to decide if the expectancy becomes fulfilled or not.” This love is mostly a “temporal expectancy, but the love that abides does not have such an expectancy.” It has an “eternal expectancy” that stabilizes any “restlessness” so that it does not oscillate back and forth between hope and hopelessness. It faithfully hopes for eternity and the eternal fulfillment of love, especially God’s love. Thus, it is willing to abide even in the midst of the absence of being loved by other humans. This is true love’s “faithfulness.” Certainly, the girl who was waiting for her beloved was neither faithless nor unfaithful. We would never want to say that, even though her love weakened and faded away over the years while she waited and her expectations were never fulfilled. Nevertheless, her love changed. It wasted away, because “erotic love itself is not the eternal. The contradiction, which the girl herself suffered, lies in this, that erotic love is not the eternal and that therefore it is impossible to relate oneself with *eternal* faithfulness to what it itself is *not* the *eternal*.” Such temporal love is completely different from eternal love that abides. It remains “completely unchanged without the slightest wasting away, the same every moment, even when, at whatever time and hour, the misunderstanding one, the unfriendly one, the hating one wants to return to this one who loves! That he who abides never wastes away is certainly an eternal gain for him,” but it is also a “work of love” in the midst of authentic and eternal “faithfulness to those whom he loves.”

What would really be a tragedy is “if, at the moment when the misunderstanding one returned and sought understanding, when the unfriendly one returned and sought friendship, when the one who had hated returned and sought reconciliation,” the one to whom this person returns has wasted away in his love. In this case, “neither understanding nor restoration of friendship nor renewal of reconciliation in love could really take place with the blessed joy of eternity!” On the other hand, what can smooth the path to reconciliation and forgiveness is if “the one who loves...by abiding in love, has continually cleared away the past,” has been willing to forget the past and look only towards the future, and ultimately towards eternity. “When two people both have an idea of the past or of how long the separation has been, forgiveness is often a difficult collision, and the relationship is perhaps never fully established again. But the one who loves knows nothing about the past; therefore he does even the last thing in love; he absorbs the jolt in such a way that there can be no collision.” Thus, the “transition of forgiveness cannot be made easier. How frequently has agreement been close to taking place between two people, but the one continued to feel hurt, as we say. When that is the case, then something from the past must have unlovingly emerged again.” However, when love is willing to absorb the jolt of the person who has caused so much pain in the past and now who wants reconciliation, then true forgiveness can take place. Nevertheless, the jolt causes the past to raise its ugly head again, and, if love is not

abiding, then reconciliation will not occur. Yet, the jolt is absorbed and eternity steps in to keep the past from overwhelming the present and the future—because love abides.

“Such is the one who loves.” His love “never wastes away.” Time does not change it. It abides eternally and the transition to forgiveness, while humanly impossible, can happen as easily as meeting an old acquaintance one knew a long time ago, or as easily as meeting someone for the first time. Thus, there would be no halt in the transition to reconciliation—“the one who loves *accomplishes* this, because [ideally!!] he abides and never wastes away” in his love.

## Chapter VII

### Mercifulness, a Work of Love Even If It Can Give Nothing and Is Able to Do Nothing

Kierkegaard begins this chapter by quoting Hebrews 13:16 in the New Testament. “Do not forget to do good and share.” However, he then seems to deny that this statement by the biblical author is valid and says, “—but do not forget either that this incessant talk by worldliness about beneficence and benevolence and generosity and charitable donations and gift upon gift is almost merciless.” What? Would Kierkegaard have us stop being generous and charitable to the poor and needy? Not at all, but he is going to lead us down a somewhat enigmatic path, and it will be tempting for me to make explicit what he keeps implicit until he is ready to reveal it himself. Therefore, I ask the reader to indulge both Kierkegaard and me in this chapter. We will not lead you astray. I say this rather boldly, implying that I believe Kierkegaard to be mostly correct, but the biblical message and his understanding of this message runs much deeper than most people are willing to admit. Kierkegaard is going to compare and contrast “generosity” and “mercifulness,” which seems like a rather odd pair to contrast. Are they not the same? Is not someone being merciful to the poor when he is being generous to the poor? These questions describe the crux of the issue, because the answer to them is—not necessarily. Alas, we appear lost in contradictions already. But wait, Kierkegaard will unravel the contradiction; however we will have to be patient. The light bulb will not come on until the end of the chapter—unless one guesses correctly before then, having by now tuned his mind to Kierkegaard in this whole book (and, I am claiming, therefore, to the Bible also). There is one word that should pop into the reader’s mind as we follow Kierkegaard through his discourse, but I will leave it up to him, Kierkegaard, to reveal this word to us explicitly when he is ready. Here we go.

“Ah, let the newspaper writers and tax collectors and the parish beadies [church officers] talk about generosity and count and count.” Does this not sound like our own times? If we add “and politicians and pastors” to this list of cultural authorities, do we not have an apt description of one of the hottest topics today, caring for the less fortunate and using whatever means, including the government, to distribute as much of the rich’s wealth to those who have less so that everyone can be happy, to tax the rich and give to the poor, to set up church programs that ensure that Christians care for those in need? Why should anyone object to this talk and these efforts, especially Kierkegaard, since he had inherited his father’s wealth and had not even worked for it? What is wrong with counting the amount of wealth that is distributed to the poor, whether through the independent generous actions of the rich or through the redistribution programs of the government and churches? Is Kierkegaard off his rocker?

He goes on to say, “but let us never ignore that Christianity speaks *essentially* of mercifulness.” Ok; but as I asked before, is not generosity a kind of mercifulness? Yes. Then what is Kierkegaard getting at? First it would be good to define “mercifulness.” Kierkegaard unpacks the meaning of this word as he goes along, but I will attempt to define it now. Mercifulness is the same as mercy, which has two components. The first is forgiveness—if it is necessary. If someone hurts me, and I do not demand that he be punished for his malfeasance, then I am granting him mercy and forgiveness. The second component is compassion in both feeling and action that helps alleviate suffering. If someone is hurting, he does not need my forgiveness. He needs my empathy and help in assuaging the pain. Perhaps he is hungry. Then I can give him food, and his hunger pangs will disappear. Perhaps he is thirsty. Then I can give him a glass of water, and his thirst will be gone. This too is mercy, and both of these

components, forgiveness and sympathy, in the midst of external help, comprise what Kierkegaard states is “*essentially*” Christianity. The reason is because “Christianity would least of all be guilty of mercilessness, as if poverty and misery not only needed money, etc. but also were excluded from the highest, from being able to practice mercifulness, because they are excluded from being able to be generous, beneficent, benevolent.” Are the poor so poor that they can give nothing to others, even to the rich? Kierkegaard is saying that one would think so by the way the dignitaries in our institutions, political and religious, talk about being charitable. “[P]eople prattle and prate ecclesiastically-worldly and worldly-ecclesiastically about generosity, beneficence—but forget, even in the sermon, mercifulness.” Yet, I keep having to ask, is not generosity the same as mercy, as I have defined it above? It certainly seems so. Then what is Kierkegaard talking about?

He goes on, “The poor person who sits in church must sigh. And why must he sigh? Is it so that his sigh, together with the pastor’s sermon, could help to get the rich man’s purse opened? Ah no, he must sigh, he must in the biblical sense ‘grumble against’ the pastor [cf. James 5:9], because just when one is so eager to help him the greatest wrong is being done.” What strange statements! At the moment that a wealthy person is responding to the exhortation of the Christian pastor who is preaching from the Bible which states unequivocally, “Remember the poor” (cf. Galatians 2:10), i.e., to be generous and charitable towards the poor, the “greatest wrong” is in the process of being perpetrated against the poor? How does this make any sense at all? (Hint—only by reading the whole Bible and not just particular verses.) “Woe to the one who devours the inheritance of widows and the fatherless [cf. Isaiah 10:2, Mark 12:40, etc.], but woe also to the preacher who is silent about mercifulness in order to talk about generosity!” But, but...mercy and generosity are the same! Kierkegaard begs to differ. “Preaching should indeed be solely and only about mercifulness,” and “then generosity will follow of itself and come by itself accordingly as the individual is capable of it.” Now we are getting somewhere. Mercy first. Then generosity.

More importantly, if there is no mercy, then generosity is merciless (with the strongest negative connotation)—regardless of how much money a person gives. “[B]ear this in mind, that if a person raised money, money, money by speaking about generosity—bear this in mind, that by being silent about mercifulness he would be acting mercilessly toward the poor and miserable person for whom he procured relief by means of the money of wealthy generosity.” If we only and solely respond to the pleas of the poor and miserable by providing them with money and the means of relief from their suffering, they have every right to “grumble against us” before God—“because we [are] atrociously unfair to poverty and misery by not telling [them] that *they* [too] are able to practice mercifulness.”

Kierkegaard goes on to say that we must “guard ourselves against confusing mercifulness with what is linked to external conditions.” This statement definitely sounds like the Kierkegaard we have come to know in this book, the one who is careful not to define a biblical person strictly by what he is doing outwardly. Because what if someone is poor and has no money? Then, his “love...does not have in its power” to give any money and thereby be generous. Yet, “his love” does have “mercifulness in its power just as surely as it has a heart in its bosom. It does not follow that because a person has a heart in his bosom he has money in his pocket, but the first is still more important and certainly is decisive with regard to mercifulness.” Yes, it is the heart that is more important than external actions, which is exactly what the Bible is emphasizing. “Truly—if a person does not have money but knows how to encourage and inspire the poor, the miserable, by speaking about mercifulness—would he not do just as much as someone

who throws some money” at the poor or “preaches charitable donations” or the distribution of wealth “out of the [taxable] rich man’s pocket!”

We may be tempted to answer quickly, yes, because mercy without generosity should make sense to us. It should resonate in our hearts and minds. However, I would suggest that if we do not find ourselves struggling at least a bit with what Kierkegaard is saying here, then we do not understand the depth of the problem of our own sin. We are naturally allergic to this kind of talk. We want to define our love and goodness strictly by our external actions, because it is much easier to do so. Plus, it easily gets the applause and approval of our fellow human beings, which is also what we crave. Nevertheless, such love is not true love and is why I think that Kierkegaard is hitting the nail on the head—that “*mercifulness*” is “*a work of love even if it can give nothing and is able to do nothing.*”

“We shall endeavor according to the capacities granted to us to make as clear as possible...to the poor person what comfort he has in being able to be merciful... But we wish also to contribute something by what we say...in order, if possible, to make ashamed in a God-pleasing way the person capable of generosity.” Kierkegaard is handing us two more rather strange sounding ideas. He wants the poor person to appreciate his ability to be merciful, even if he is starving to death. In addition, he wants the rich person who is giving his money to the poor to feel a sense of shame. What kind of perspective does a person have to adopt in order to agree with these two odd concepts? The answer is quite simple—a biblical perspective. As Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy,” and he never intended to exclude anyone, including the poor, from being merciful (cf. Matthew 5:7). He also said, “So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men... But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (cf. Matthew 6:2,3). Thus, each of us should feel at least some guilt when we are generous because of the unbiblical need that we feel to be acknowledged publicly for our charity. For example, why are fundraisers most successful when they are as public as possible? Is it not so that we can feel good about ourselves—not only because we are being generous to a worthy cause, but also because other people know that we are being charitable?

However, Kierkegaard continues with the statement that true “[*m*]ercifulness has *nothing to give.*” Certainly, “if the merciful person has something to give,” then he willingly gives it—money, time, comfort, etc. “But it is not on this that we focus” our attention, because even if someone has nothing of the above to give, he can still give mercy. Thus, “*being able* to be merciful certainly is” of far greater importance than having money and “*to be able* to give” it.

Kierkegaard borrows the parable of the “Good Samaritan” to illustrate his point. Let me quote the entire passage from the gospel of Luke so that we make sure we are familiar with all the details of the story –

[Luke 10:25](#) And a lawyer [an expert in Mosaic Covenant] stood up and put Him [Jesus] to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

[Luke 10:26](#) And He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?”

[Luke 10:27](#) And he answered, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF” [Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18].

[Luke 10:28](#) And He said to him, “You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE” [Leviticus 18:5].

[Luke 10:29](#) But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

[Luke 10:30](#) Jesus replied and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead.

[Luke 10:31](#) “And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

[Luke 10:32](#) “Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

[Luke 10:33](#) “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion,

[Luke 10:34](#) and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him.

[Luke 10:35](#) “On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’

[Luke 10:36](#) “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?”

[Luke 10:37](#) And he said, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do the same.” (NAS95)

Kierkegaard comments, if the Samaritan “had come not riding but walking along the road from Jericho to Jerusalem, where he saw the unfortunate man lying, if he had been carrying with him nothing with which he could bind up wounds, if he had then lifted up the unfortunate man, laid him on his shoulders, and carried him to the nearest inn, where the innkeeper refused to receive either him or the unfortunate one because the Samaritan did not have a penny, could only beg and beseech this hard-hearted man to be merciful since a man’s life was involved... [I]f now the Samaritan...had gone away carrying the unfortunate man, had sought a softer resting place..., had sat by his side, had done everything to stanch the flow of blood—but the unfortunate one died in his hands—would he not have been equally as merciful” as the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable in Luke 10?

Kierkegaard also asks about the story of “the woman who laid two pennies in the temple box,” but he chooses to make a slight change in the story. Let us also familiarize ourselves with this text –

[Luke 21:1](#) And He [Jesus] looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury.

[Luke 21:2](#) And He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins.

[Luke 21:3](#) And He said, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them;

[Luke 21:4](#) for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.” (NAS95)

Kierkegaard wonders, suppose she “had saved for a long time in order to accumulate” the two pennies, had then set them aside and wrapped them in a little cloth in order to bring them to the temple. “But a swindler detected that she possessed this money, had tricked her out of it and put instead an identical cloth in which there was



nothing—but the widow did not know this.” Then, when she went up to the temple, she reached into the cloth and produced nothing to put into the temple box. “[W]ould not Christ still have said what he said to her, that ‘she gave more than all of the rich people gave?’” Yes, this sounds correct, but on what basis? Even Kierkegaard asks, “a mercifulness without money, what can it accomplish?” Nothing in a worldly sense. In fact, “the worldly-minded brazenness of generosity and beneficence goes so far that it even laughs in scorn at a mercifulness that owns nothing!” In other words, the world fully admires only one kind of generosity and mercy—that which has something tangible to give, such as money, food, medicine, etc.

Certainly, “when a poor person gives her last penny and the rich one comes along and gives hundreds of dollars, . . . then all look at the hundreds of dollars.” We just cannot help but do so. As a result, “the rich one with his gifts completely overshadows the poor one’s—mercifulness.” Is it not “madness” for Christ to say “that the poor person gave **the most**” when she obviously gave less? The world “says that the rich man gave the most . . . [b]ecause the world understands only about money” while Christ understands only about mercy. In fact, according to Kierkegaard, if the widow had given only one penny, she still would have given more than the rich. “What a wonderful arithmetic problem, or rather what a wonderful kind of arithmetic; it is not to be found in any arithmetic textbook!” And Christ even says that “‘she gave out of her poverty.’ But if the greatness of the gift increases in proportion to the greatness of the poverty, thus the very opposite of what the world thinks (that the greatness of the gift is proportionate to the wealth),” then someone with only one penny, by giving the penny out of his poverty, gives more than the widow who gave two pennies—out of her poverty; and they both gave more than all the rich.

“Yes, the world must think this the most annoying kind of arithmetic, in which one penny can become . . . the most significant gift of all. The world and the world’s generosity would rather deal with large sums that amaze; and one penny certainly does not amaze—any more than” mercy is “one of the glittering virtues.” In other words, generosity is more “glittering” than mercy, especially when generosity is expressed in hundreds, thousands, or better yet millions of dollars. What, then, is the big deal about mercy? Kierkegaard once again focuses our attention on one word—eternity, which we have learned is merely a substitute for God. “Eternity has the sharpest eye for, and the most developed understanding of, mercifulness but has no understanding about money, any more than eternity is in a financial predicament or has . . . the slightest use for money.” Kierkegaard goes on to say that “many [people] are of the opinion that the eternal is a delusion and that money is reality, whereas in the understanding of eternity and of truth money is a delusion!” The reason that Kierkegaard has adopted this perspective is because he believes that there will be no money in eternity. Should we follow him in this whole idea? Is money the problem or the *love of money* as the apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:10? Perhaps, it is the love of money to which Kierkegaard is actually referring.

He continues with asking the question, “What is the earnestness of life?” He answers—it is a person’s “God-relationship. Wherever the thought of God accompanies what a person does, thinks, and says, earnestness is present . . . But money is the world’s god; therefore the world thinks that everything that involves money or is connected to money is earnestness.” Then Kierkegaard goes on to claim that the apostle Paul would not “defile the Gospel” by taking money for his proclamation of it. Again, though, did Paul object to getting paid for preaching the gospel, or was he against *demanding* that one get paid? I think it was the latter (cf. 1 Corinthians 9). Yet, Kierkegaard is certainly right about one thing, that the world worships money and Christians get caught up in the same attitude. They just put a biblical spin on the pursuit of money, claiming that God has promised to prosper materially those who obey him. “This is how we are brought up

[whether in the world or in the church]; from earliest childhood we are disciplined in the ungodly worship of money” even while claiming that we worship God.

Then he cites an example. “Think of a household” where the father says that the next day, Sunday, the whole family is going to church. However, what if his children are late in getting dressed, making the whole family late for church—or they do not go at all? Kierkegaard says that the father will not reprimand his children. Instead, what if everyone were going to the “theater” and tickets had been bought and the children were late—thus preventing the family from seeing at least the first act, because they were locked out of the theater until a suitable time to enter—during an intermission? “[J]ust imagine how this earnest father would carry on then—and why? Because considerable money” was in the process of being wasted, “whereas by staying home on Sunday even the offering money was saved.” By wasting the money spent on the theater, the children will really hear it from their father. Money has been lost, and it deserves an appropriate scolding. “[T]his is called upbringing! Well, it may be upbringing, except that in this way it is not human beings who are brought up but fools and monsters instead”—because they lack instruction in mercy while knowing all about money.

Kierkegaard goes on to say that “if one has this conception of money,” then what is this person’s conception of mercy “that is without money?” Certainly this person will think that mercy without money is a kind of “lunacy.” Money, Kierkegaard says, stinks, but mercy “is the strong fragrance” that can eliminate the bad odor of money. “If prayer is an offering of the lips and pleasing to God, then mercifulness is actually the heart’s offering and is, as Scripture says, a sweet fragrance in God’s nostrils. [cf. Hebrews 13:15]. Oh, when you think of God, never forget that he does not have the least understanding about money.” Really? Or is Kierkegaard being a bit extreme here?

He continues, “My listener, if you were a speaker, what assignment would you choose: to speak to the rich about practicing generosity or to speak to the poor about practicing” mercy? In other words, which is more important—for the rich to be generous towards the poor, or for the poor to be merciful towards the rich? Kierkegaard claims that it is the latter. If the poor person is abandoned to his misery and only made the object of the rich’s generosity and mercifulness, then “[m]erciful God, what mercilessness.” There is the poor person with the ability at least to be merciful, and he is not encouraged to exercise this most important ability.

“So the discourse addresses itself to you, you poor and wretched! Oh, be merciful! Keep within your bosom this heart that despite poverty and misery still has sympathy for the misery of others, this heart that before God has the bold confidence to know that one can be merciful, indeed, that to the highest degree one can then be most merciful in the eminent and excellent sense when one has nothing to give.” If the word “mercy” is used only to refer to the generosity of the rich towards the poor and does not include the poor’s expression towards the rich, especially the rich who are not generous and who oppress the poor, then the word has lost its biblical content. Kierkegaard exhorts the poor, “Do not let the envious pettiness of this earthly existence finally corrupt you so that you could forget that you are able to be merciful” even when you are unable to give anything “out of your poverty... Be merciful, be merciful toward the rich” who withhold their help, their generosity towards you. “[D]o not be so merciless as to call down heaven’s punishment on his [the rich’s] mercilessness!” God will sort things out at the end, at the final judgment. Your responsibility in the present realm is to be rich in mercy. Mercy turns two pennies into a larger sum than millions of dollars. How many people there are who have allowed money to make them merciless; and if money makes merciless even those who have no money, “then the power of money has conquered completely, then mercifulness is completely abolished also.”

*“Mercifulness is able to do nothing.”*

Kierkegaard now turns to the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 to illustrate this statement. I provide here the story to help us understand its fullness –

[Luke 16:14](#) Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him.

[Luke 16:15](#) And He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.

[Luke 16:16](#) “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

[Luke 16:17](#) “But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail...

[Luke 16:19](#) “Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day.

[Luke 16:20](#) “And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores,

[Luke 16:21](#) and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man’s table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

[Luke 16:22](#) “Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.

[Luke 16:23](#) “In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom.

[Luke 16:24](#) “And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.’

[Luke 16:25](#) “But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.

[Luke 16:26](#) ‘And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.’

[Luke 16:27](#) “And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father’s house —

[Luke 16:28](#) for I have five brothers — in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

[Luke 16:29](#) “But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’

[Luke 16:30](#) “But he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’

[Luke 16:31](#) “But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’” (NAS95)

Kierkegaard comments on this story, “Neither Lazarus’s misery nor the rich man’s luxury is elaborated and described, yet one incident is added that is worth noting. It is told that Lazarus, full of sores, was laid at the rich man’s door, but the dogs came and licked his sores. What is this supposed to portray in the rich man? Mercilessness, or, more exactly, inhuman mercilessness.” In order to portray lack of mercy, one could use a person who expresses mercy towards Lazarus as happened in the story of the Good

Samaritan who showed mercy in contrast to the Levite and the priest. In this case, though, Jesus uses dogs. “What a contrast!” Dogs cannot be merciful, “but in contrast to the rich man it seems as if the dogs were merciful. What is shocking is that when the human being had abandoned mercifulness, the dogs had to be merciful. —But there is something else in this comparison between the rich man and the dogs. The rich man had it abundantly enough in his power to do something for Lazarus, the dogs were able to do nothing, and yet it is as if the dogs were merciful.”

A person who is merciful and able to do something to help others will naturally do so. However, such active mercy is not what Kierkegaard has wanted to address, but rather “that one can be merciful without being able to do the least thing. This is of great importance, since being able to be merciful is certainly a far greater perfection than to be able to do something,” especially for eternity’s sake. In other words, eternity (and God) calls us to be merciful and to include generosity if we are able, but eternity knows nothing of generosity if it is not grounded in mercy. Such is the “madness” of the Bible.

Kierkegaard puts it this way, “If someone has cut off my hands, then I cannot play the zither, and if someone has cut off my feet, then I cannot dance, and if I lie crippled on the shore, then I cannot throw myself into the sea in order to rescue another person’s life, and if I myself am lying with a broken arm or leg, then I cannot plunge into the flames to save another’s life—but I can still be merciful.”

Then, he considers another illustration—literally. “I have often pondered how a painter might portray a merciful person, but I have decided that it cannot be done. As soon as the painter is to do it, it becomes dubious whether it is mercifulness or it is something else.” Kierkegaard claims that the painter cannot depict mercy, because it demonstrates itself most “when a person gives two pennies and yet all that he has,” i.e., “when the helpless person is able to do nothing and yet is merciful.” On the other hand, art prefers to portray that which is grandiose, which in this case is “generosity” and not “mercy.” Thus, art prefers “the great deed,” such as giving a million dollars. “Try to paint this: a poor woman who gives another the only bread she has,” and this only a tiny amount—“and you will very easily perceive that you cannot express the most important thing. You can express that it is one piece of bread but not that it is the only one she has.”

Kierkegaard next would have us imagine those who from childhood are so incapacitated and handicapped “that they are unable to do anything at all, perhaps are even scarcely able to express sympathy in clear words” because of a speech impediment. He then asks, “should we now be so merciless as to add this new cruelty to all their misery, to deny them the capacity to be merciful,” because a painter could not paint this person’s mercy and society makes him strictly an *object* of other people’s generosity? But Kierkegaard again claims that this person’s mercy would be “the most beautiful and the truest,” especially because he has not been hardened “by his own suffering so that he has lost sympathy for others.”

Here is another example—a widow in poverty whose daughter nature has prevented having any great ability “to alleviate her mother’s condition,” and yet the daughter “sighs under the heavy burden” of using whatever giftedness she possesses to be “inexhaustibly inventive in order to do the little bit, the nothing that she is able to do” in order to reduce her mother’s misery. Yet, Kierkegaard calls out to the reader, “See, this mercifulness!” and then claims, “No rich man will waste thousands of dollars to have an artist paint this, because it cannot be painted.”

However, what if this widow also has a rich man in her life who is supporting her? Then, every time she receives his gift, “the poor daughter is put to shame,” because he can do so much more than she can and “his mercifulness overshadows the girl’s

mercifulness”—at least “in the eyes of the world, perhaps even in the eye of an artist,” and in the eye of the daughter if she is not looking at her efforts as Jesus would.

Therefore, Kierkegaard says that this “discourse addresses itself to you, you wretched one who is able to do nothing at all: Do not forget to be merciful. Be merciful. This comfort [to the poor], that you are able to be merciful, to say nothing of the comfort that you are merciful, is far greater than if I were to assure you that” the wealthiest and the most powerful people in the world are going to show you mercy and give you millions of dollars, taking care of your every physical need. Instead, Kierkegaard exhorts the poor, “Be merciful to us more fortunate ones!” which is a warning to the rest of us not to place the emphasis on our generosity, but on our mercy, because remember that eternity knows nothing of generosity, but only of mercy. Then he asks, “Indeed, which is more merciful:” for the rich powerfully to eliminate the suffering and needs of the poor, or for the poor to suffer quietly and keep an eye on the rich mercifully and patiently lest they “disturb the joy and happiness of others? Which of these two loves more:” the wealthy ones who have sympathy for the suffering of the poor, or the poor who have “true sympathy for the joy and happiness of others?” We have to ask, does this really make sense, especially in the light of the Bible and its many exhortations to care for the poor?

The world cries out—No! In fact, it would say, “*But the main thing is still this, that need be remedied in every way, and that everything possible be done to remedy all need.*” However, Kierkegaard argues that this “is the way temporality, well intentioned, talks and it cannot talk in any other way. Eternity, on the other hand, says: There is only one danger, that mercifulness is not practiced,” because even if all suffering in the present world were eliminated, “it still is not settled that it was done through mercifulness, and if this was not the case, this wretchedness, that mercifulness was not practiced at all, would be greater than all temporal need.”

“The point is that the world does not understand eternity,” or God for that matter. The world and its eyes on what is only temporal and temporary consider two things to be important—activity and quantity that fulfill people’s needs. If a person *acts* generously, and if he gives a *large sum of money*, then the world is impressed. The world says, “The poor” person could die if we do not help him. Therefore, “the most important thing is that help be given. No, answers eternity, the most important thing is that mercifulness be practiced”—whether or not someone has the ability to meet another person’s need. “Provide money for us, provide hospitals [and health care] for us, that is most important,” again the world says. No, says eternity, the most important is mercy. “From the point of view of eternity, that everyone dies is no misfortune, but that mercifulness is not practiced certainly is,” which all sounds very strange, even cruel, in the light of the political and religious climate in our world. To improve people’s lives and share the world’s wealth with those less fortunate is what is most important, or we simply are not being Christians or appropriately religious—the world argues.

“Eternity maintains inflexibly” that mercy is the most important. “No thinker can be as obstinate as eternity is with regard to its thought. No thinker is as calm and undisturbed by the pressures” at this very moment of the needs of people, which still seem to communicate that meeting these physical needs is most important. “And no thinker is as sure that ultimately people will have to give in and think his thoughts as eternity. It says: Just wait, we will talk about this in eternity, and there we will talk simply and solely about mercifulness, and simply and solely about the distinction” between being merciful and not being merciful.

Kierkegaard continues, “Would that I could depict the countenance eternity will assume when the rich man answers the question whether he has been merciful and says: I have given a hundred thousand to the poor! Eternity will look at him in amazement, like someone who cannot comprehend what he is talking about, and will

again put the question to him: Have you been merciful?" Eternity will understand no better than a mountain or the wind what the rich man is saying.

Finally, Kierkegaard shares the depth of his thinking on this issue with us. "Is it mercifulness to give a hundred thousand to the poor? No. Is it mercifulness to give two pennies to the poor? No. Mercifulness is **how** it is given. But in that case the hundred thousand and the two pennies are unimportant," because we can conceive of mercy in either one. Two pennies can be just as merciful as a million dollars, which allows us to see the two pennies and not be so impressed with the million dollars when their glittering value outshines and obscures the two pennies. We see the two pennies equally—with the same impression as the million dollars.

"Is it mercifulness when someone who is able to do everything does everything for the wretched" and the poor? "No. Is it mercifulness if someone who is able to do what amounts to nothing does this nothing for the wretched" and the poor? "No. Mercifulness is **how** this everything and this nothing are done. But then I can just as well see mercifulness in this everything and in this nothing; and if this is so, then I can actually see it best in this nothing, because being able to do everything is a glittering externality" that has a powerful effect on my senses and "easily draws attention to itself, and disturbs me in seeing mercifulness."

One more illustration from Kierkegaard—"If you wished to observe the movements, the circles, that a stone produces and forms when it is thrown into the water, would you then travel" a long distance if necessary "where the mighty waterfall plunges down turbulently" and throw the stone in there? Or would you "throw the stone" in the sea during a hurricane? "No, you would not," because the turbulence and rough sea would draw your eye away from whatever circles the stone might make. Therefore, you would find a "quiet little pond, the smaller the better, throw out the stone, and now, undisturbed" by anything else going on with the water, "properly focus your attention upon observing the movements."

Kierkegaard asks—How do we typically measure a person's worth? Is it not by his material wealth that surrounds him, or his many awards for his performance, "or would you not feel that this would disturb your full concentration of mind on contemplating his significant inner being"—where we should find mercifulness? But if we measure a person's worth by his mercifulness, then "the hundred thousand or doing everything in a worldly way is" certainly a "*significant* help." Nevertheless, it is not what is truly *significant*. This is reserved for mercy. The latter "significance [mercy] is that which is to be looked *at*; the former, the outward help, "is that which is to be looked *away from*... [T]he world thinks it far easier to be able to become aware of mercifulness when it gives the hundred thousand than when it gives the two pennies, and consequently thinks it easiest to become aware of mercifulness by looking at that which is to be looked away from if one is really to see mercifulness."

"Let us not forget, however, that mercifulness can be seen in both instances, in the two pennies and in the hundred thousand, in the everything that the powerful one does and in the nothing the wretched one does. However, even if it is granted that mercifulness is present" in both, you will easily realize that "the more spectacular the gift is" and the more fully a person's generosity can meet the needs of the poor, "the more there will be something that will prevent you from dwelling wholly on the mercifulness." Miracles run the same risk of diverting people's attention away from the main point. When the apostle Peter healed the lame man one day on his way to the temple, "Peter said to him, 'Silver and gold I do not have, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth stand up and walk.' He then took him by the right hand and raised him up" so that immediately he began to walk [cf. Acts 3:6]. "Who would dare doubt that this [miracle] is a work of mercifulness... But a miracle immediately draws

attention to itself and thereby to a degree away from the mercifulness, which never becomes clearer than when it is able to do nothing at all, because then there is nothing whatever to prevent seeing very definitely and accurately what mercifulness is.”

“Eternity [and therefore God] understands only mercifulness; therefore if you want to learn to understand mercifulness, you must learn it from eternity.” Now, finally, Kierkegaard explicitly provides us with the word that we should have been thinking of all along to comprehend what he is saying about the difference between mercy and generosity. “But if you are to have an understanding of the eternal, there must be stillness around you while you concentrate your attention completely on **inwardness**” [emphasis mine]. How quickly and easily the ability to give so much externally, a hundred thousand or a million dollars, distracts your mind and turns your attention away from inwardness. You “become amazed at the externals. But if you are amazed, then you can be sure that it is not mercifulness you are seeing, because mercifulness does not arouse amazement” in the eyes of the world, which is allergic to mercy, especially God’s mercy, and emphasizes generosity, indeed is obsessed with generosity in order to avoid God’s mercy. “What indeed is there to be amazed at if even the poorest wretch, and he best of all, can practice mercifulness? Mercifulness, if you in truth do perceive it, does not arouse amazement; it stirs you; just because it is inwardness, it makes the deepest impression upon you. But when is inwardness more clear than when there is nothing external at all, or when the external by its very lowliness and insignificance is rather like...a hindrance to seeing the inwardness? And when this is the case with regard to mercifulness, we do indeed have the mercifulness that this discourse has been about, the mercifulness that is a work of love even if it has nothing to give and is able to do nothing.”

## Chapter VIII

### The Victory of the Conciliatory Spirit in Love, Which Wins the One Overcome

Kierkegaard begins this chapter, “To continue to stand after having overcome everything!” — a quote from the apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (6:13), which, as far as Kierkegaard is concerned, is “rather easy” to understand. “If one actually has overcome everything, then is there anything more against which one has to continue to stand?” Obviously not—it would seem. If a person has conquered and overcome everything, then he continues to stand. No one has brought him down and defeated him. He has been victorious, and continuing to stand after a battle is the sign of victory that every combatant strives for. On the other hand, it is “self-evident that someone who cowardly and fearfully never ventures out into danger never conquers either, never overcomes anything.” And the result for him? He “gave up” and does not continue to stand, because he never fought the battle. The only way to “overcome” is to win, and the only way to win is to fight, and the only way to fight is to venture into danger and confront it.

However, Kierkegaard is being rather sly here, because he goes on to say that “just when a person has overcome everything, he is perhaps closest to losing everything.” All he has to do is “lose something” and it means that he has lost “everything,” because he no longer has “everything.” So the “very moment of victory is the most difficult, more difficult than any moment during the battle... When you say that someone overcomes something, you picture him leaning forward to advance against what is the opposition. Thus, in the deepest sense there cannot be any question of standing,” because the victor is leaning forward even if his enemy is holding on to him. Now, if he falls, he falls over his own feet, thus falling not “in the danger, but in his own momentum.” In contrast, “the fearful person succumbs before the opposition” and falls in the midst of defeat.

Building towards his topic, Kierkegaard then refers to another verse that Paul wrote where he says that “in faith we more than conquer” (Romans 8:37). Kierkegaard asks, though, if it is really possible that “one can more than conquer?” Yes, he answers, but only if the person continues standing after the victory, “if one preserves the victory, remains in the victory.” But, again, how can a person fall after conquering his enemy? As Kierkegaard has already mentioned, the victor could fall over his own feet, even metaphorically speaking, which is to say that he could fall if he is unprepared for the effects of victory which follow. For example, if someone who has “advanced victoriously against the storm without weakening was too exhausted to endure the dead calm that came in the victory,” or “who was so tough that he could stand all the changes of weather, heat and cold,” but “could not bear the troublesome breeze in the moment of victory!” And then worst of all, “how often a victory has been made empty when the victor became proud, conceited, arrogant, and self-satisfied” and, therefore, actually *lost* the battle by having conquered his enemy with an attitude of arrogance. We remember the saying, pride goeth before the fall—that even if the prideful person wins, he actually loses, because his arrogance robs his victory of its true value.

Referring to Ephesians 6:13 again, Kierkegaard draws all of these ideas together by saying that “continuing to stand after having overcome everything” means that, “in the spiritual sense, there are always two victories, a first victory” when the battle is actually won, and then a second victory “in which the first victory is preserved!” He decides that these two victories are how to describe most exactly the difference “between the religious and the worldly”—“[t]he worldly speaks continually of only one victory, the religious continually of two.” The worldly person moves immediately from victory into celebrating the victory. The spiritual person, however, realizes that the victory only



“leads him into a new battle, into the most difficult battle of all, because it is the most inward, because in this battle he is battling with himself and with God.” When a battle is strictly external, “I can fall by the hand of another,” but, when the battle is internal and therefore spiritual, “only one person can slay me, and that is myself.” Therefore, in the spiritual sense, “murder is impossible.” No human being can take the life of another human being spiritually speaking. Instead, “only suicide is possible” when only I, and not another human being, can prevent me from moving on after the first victory into the second battle and pursuing its victory.

Kierkegaard proceeds, “If a person is victorious in this second battle, it specifically means that he does not receive the honor of the first victory, because to be victorious means in this context to give God the honor.” While Kierkegaard is being somewhat obscure here as usual, he would have us patiently follow his thoughts and words until the light bulb turns on for us, and we can say, ok, now I get it. Therefore, we must once again permit Kierkegaard to lead us down the primrose path of his ideas. When he says that God receives the honor and glory for having accomplished the first victory, he is referring to a spiritual and moral battle. He goes on to say, “In the first conflict the battle is against the world.” Then, “in the second conflict the battle is with God.” What exactly are these two conflicts? Even if we cannot precisely answer this question yet, we know that the second conflict involves *continuing* to stand. For example, after defeating his enemy, will the person become arrogant and fall, or will he remain humble and continue to stand? Will he claim that it was by his own strength and cleverness that he won the first battle, or will he admit that it was only by God’s grace and strength that he did so? Therefore, this second conflict is won “when a person in the very moment of [the first] victory relinquishes the victory to God. “[O]nly then does [he] continue to stand after having overcome everything.”

Kierkegaard says that as “long as he was fighting, the opposition [the world] in a certain sense helped him to stand; but when he has given God the honor of the victory, God is the support with whose help he continues to stand.” Certainly, it is also true that God was the support and reason he won the first battle “(although in the external sense the victory can be won without God’s support).” Again, we notice Kierkegaard’s focusing on the internal vs. the external, inwardness vs. outwardness, that has been and is the key to understanding his grasp of biblical theology. There is much in the Bible regarding external actions that demonstrate obedience to God. For example, God commands the nation of Israel to eat only particular foods (cf. Leviticus 11), and Jesus commands his apostles to baptize in water all the nations (cf. Matthew 28:18-20). Nevertheless, the Bible makes it clear that it is a person’s inwardness that is fundamentally important and that demonstrates authentic obedience. David says to God in Psalm 51 after he has committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, Uriah the Hittite –

[Psa. 51:16](#) For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;  
You are not pleased with burnt offering.

[Psa. 51:17](#) The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. (NAS95)

As Kierkegaard says in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, “Guilt is the most concrete expression of human existence.” The most important thing a human being can do is face into his inner immorality, not just his immoral actions, and then appeal to God for mercy with a “broken and contrite heart.” Such honest repentance is true inwardness and authentic biblical spirituality. In contrast, Jesus says to the Pharisees, who thought that they were so meticulous in their obedience to God –

[Matt. 23:25](#) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.

[Matt. 23:26](#) “You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”

[Matt. 23:27](#) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.

[Matt. 23:28](#) “So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (NAS95)

We can appear good and moral on the outside, but what is important is that we deal with the “robbery,” greed, envy, evil cravings, “self-indulgence,” “hypocrisy,” and “lawlessness” on the inside. In Jesus’ day, a hypocrite was not someone who said one thing and did another. The word came out of the Greek theater and described a person who did exactly what he said, but according to a script. In this case, the Pharisees had turned the Mosaic Covenant into a religious script to follow like actors on a stage, and they followed their script down to the smallest detail of God’s commandments in the covenant. However, they were not concerned about their inward moral condition. Their concern was looking good to other people with their outward actions and not coming to grips before God with their inward moral depravity. The point is that a person can go through his entire life doing the former, looking good on the outside, and never deal with the latter—the inward and moral problems. Kierkegaard believes that the former is the battle against the world (the first conflict), while the latter is the battle with oneself (the second conflict).

He is also convinced that the first conflict does not necessarily require God’s help. If someone is concerned only about how they appear to others, he can discipline himself to choose and act morally—*externally*. However, only with God’s help can a person overcome the enemy in the second conflict—*internally*, and the world even thinks that it is a waste of time to talk about needing “God’s support most when one has won the [first] victory!” The world is concerned only about the external, and once I have won this battle, why would I need God’s help as if there were any more battles to fight? But there is one more battle, indeed a very important battle, the inward one, that, only with God’s help, can I fight and win.

Now Kierkegaard focuses on the “double conflict or double victory: *the victory of the conciliatory spirit in love, which wins the one overcome*,” and he finally explicitly defines the two battles and their respective victories.

“What is this [first] victory? It is to overcome evil with good” (cf. Romans 12:21). Our natural reaction to evil is to avenge ourselves with evil in return, but to do good towards the one who is evil, and to seek to overcome his evil with good? This is truly a battle, and it is one that the world itself understands. To choose to love with true works of love in the face of the other person’s evil, to love the other person in spite of how unloving he has been, even the world commends these actions. Nevertheless, there is still a danger. Kierkegaard continues, “The more good the one who loves has done for the unloving person, the longer he has persevered in repaying evil with good, the closer in a certain sense the danger comes that finally the evil overcomes the one who loves, if in no other way than by making him cool and indifferent toward such an unloving person.”

Kierkegaard understands that length of time makes a difference. If a person has to love someone who is difficult to love, and then love him some more, and then love him some more, and all the time with great difficulty, then eventually the one who is repaying

evil with good may simply lose interest in loving. After all, how long must we put up with people who make it so difficult for us to love them? How long must we repay evil with good before it makes sense to repay evil with evil—or at least with justice instead of mercy? Nevertheless, when the loving one finishes repaying evil with good (however long it might take), he has won the first battle. He has overcome evil with good. In this sense, “the unloving person is one who has been overcome,” because the one who has loved him, who chose to do good instead of evil, indeed in the face of evil, has not permitted the other person’s evil to dissuade him or discourage him from persevering in doing good.

Then Kierkegaard asks what the relationship was like between the two people in this first battle? “On the one side stood the one who loves (or what we could also call him: the good, the noble, since in this first conflict it is not yet altogether clear that he is the one who loves).” In other words, this “one who loves” may not be loving with true, biblical love, because his love could be only in an external sense and not in a genuine, inward sense. Only if his love is inward can we say that he is truly loving—biblically speaking; but Kierkegaard’s whole point is that it will require the second battle, the second conflict, to find out if his love is inward and not just an external show.

He then continues with his description of the relationship between the two persons who are in conflict. “On the other side stood the unloving one fighting with the help of evil.” In the midst of their conflict, the “one who loves had the task of maintaining himself in the good so that evil would not get power over him. Therefore, he was dealing not so much with the unloving person as with himself.” The one who loves has had to fight against his natural reaction to avenge himself with evil. Thus, this person “was not fighting to win the battle for the sake of the unloving one but for the sake of the good, and also, in the noble sense, for his own sake.” He did not want to capitulate to evil. He did not want the other person’s weapon, evil, to become his weapon. He did not want to become overcome by the unloving one’s evil but instead to overcome the unloving one’s evil with good. Thus, he was fighting not only the other person but also himself, which is a battle between good and evil and, at the very least, externally. However, when the loving one chooses to remain loving throughout the entire first conflict, he ensures that the unloving one is overcome—in the sense that the unloving one does not move him to use evil against evil, but he remains firm in fighting evil with good. He gains the victory in the battle by not allowing evil to become the weapon with which he fights. He fights with the help of only the good instead.

Now “the relationship is changed; from now on it becomes altogether clear that it is the loving one who is engaged in the conflict, because he is not only fighting so that the good may abide within himself, but he is fighting *conciliatingly* for the good to be victorious in the unloving person.” Conciliatingly? There is a good word for you. To conciliate is to placate or pacify, to stop someone from being angry with you. Thus, the loving person has as his ultimate goal not only to continue to love even when time and the arduous task of loving the unloving would have made him quit, but also to win the unloving one over to the side of love, to convince him that being loving and pursuing goodness is better than being unloving and pursuing evil. Kierkegaard says that the loving one “is struggling *to win the one overcome*,” which will mean that “the relationship between the two is no longer an outright conflict-relationship, because the loving one is fighting on the side of [his] enemy for his benefit.” He wants the unloving one to become loving. He “wants to fight the cause of the unloving one to victory,” the victory of his changing sides and embracing goodness and love.

Kierkegaard says that such a desire demonstrates “the *conciliatory spirit in love*,” and he goes on to define it in more detail. When someone who has wronged you and hurt you comes to you and asks for forgiveness, if it is only then that you are *willing* to

forgive, then you have been slow to forgive—even if instantly you say yes. If, instead, “long, long before [your] enemy thinks of seeking” your forgiveness, you have already forgiven him, then you have “gone over to the enemy’s side” and have been “fighting for his cause,” even if your enemy has no idea that this is what you are doing. Kierkegaard calls such effort “a battle of love or a battle in love! To fight with the help of the good *against* the enemy—that is laudable and noble; but to fight *for* the enemy—and against whom? Against oneself, if you will—this, yes, this is loving, or this is the conciliatory spirit in love!”

Kierkegaard reminds us that Jesus put it this way in the Sermon on the Mount—“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember...that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar (because, if this is so, there is no hurry about the gift) and go; be reconciled with your brother...and then come and offer your gift” (cf. Matthew 5:23,24). “But,” Kierkegaard asks, “is this not asking too much,” to seek out forgiveness when “your brother has something against you?” In other words, is it not expecting too much of the other person to forgive you when you have hurt him? Should you not, perhaps instead, wait until your brother approaches you and says that he is willing to forgive you? Then he will be ready to forgive you, whereas, otherwise, before he is ready, he may surely resist the whole idea of forgiveness.

But Kierkegaard follows this thread and asks—what if “your brother” as the loving one “needs to forgive” you? Then obviously you need to give him the opportunity to forgive, or you at least need to find out if he is a loving one who understands that he needs to forgive, that is, if he has a conciliatory spirit. Kierkegaard is implying that “the conciliatory spirit” needs “to forgive already when the other perhaps has not had the slightest thought of seeking forgiveness.” In other words, the loving person with the conciliatory spirit should figure out that he must forgive someone who has hurt him and commit himself to doing so long before the other one has even thought about seeking his forgiveness. This is how true, biblical love is defined, not just worldly love that understands the value of a rather shallow form of external goodness but lacks a deep understanding of mercy, especially our need for mercy from God.

Thus, Jesus goes on to say, “Agree quickly with your adversary” (Matthew 5:25), because if he is willing to forgive, then it behooves you to meet his *need* to forgive. Notice that, in this case, the truly “needy one” is the one who needs to forgive, and it is best “to forgive already when the other person has not had the slightest thought of seeking forgiveness.” Thus, “one forgives before forgiveness is requested—indeed fights to come to the point of giving it while resistance is still made, not against giving but against accepting forgiveness.” In this situation, the attitudes are reversed in comparison to what Kierkegaard had described above. In other words, it is not the one who needs to forgive his enemy who is resistant, but it is the one who needs the forgiveness. Thus, the loving one fights to forgive his adversary even when his adversary, the one who needs forgiveness, is fighting to prevent his being forgiven. The loving one keeps fighting and fighting—not only to forgive the one who has hurt him, but also to convince the one who has hurt him to receive his forgiveness. Would anyone deny that this battle is not only difficult but unnatural—unless out of some sort of spiritual pride, which itself is evil, I were to demand that my enemy accept my forgiveness?

Kierkegaard states the case bluntly, “Do pay attention to what the relationship is, because the essentially Christian is always exactly the opposite of what the natural man most readily and naturally understands.” The world says—let my enemy come and beg for forgiveness—because the world understands only justice, unless it promotes mercy and compassion in a prideful and, therefore, perverse way. Thus, the world would understand the phrase “To fight for forgiveness” as “fighting to get forgiveness,” not to give it. “Yet,” Kierkegaard says, “this is not at all what we are speaking about; we are

speaking about fighting in love so that the other will accept forgiveness, will allow himself to be reconciled. Is this not Christianity? It is indeed God in heaven who through the apostle says, 'Be reconciled'; it is not human beings who say to God, 'Forgive us.' No, God loved us first" (cf. 1 John 4:19).

In other words, God is the one who initiates in seeking to forgive and to grant mercy to us human beings. It is not that Kierkegaard is saying that we never say to God, "Forgive us," but that we never say it without God's having initiated, without his having made the first move, even by his having created us as beings who inherently sense our moral depravity and his justice and mercy. This is Kierkegaard's model for our seeking to forgive and granting mercy to other human beings. While indeed we do say to God, "Forgive us," Kierkegaard points out that the apostle John said, "We love because He [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). We never initiate in our relationships with God. He always acts lovingly first, even to change our hearts and move us to appeal to him for forgiveness, which is why God says to the nation of Israel through Moses in Deuteronomy –

[Deut. 30:5](#) "The LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers.

[Deut. 30:6](#) "Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live." (NAS95)

Similarly, the apostle Paul says of Christians in Titus –

[Titus 3:4](#) But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared,

[Titus 3:5](#) He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,

[Titus 3:6](#) whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

[Titus 3:7](#) so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (NAS95)

Both concepts of "circumcision of the heart" and "regeneration" refer to God's loving and inward change of people that results in their loving him in return. As Kierkegaard himself has been pointing out, God's method by which he grants mercy and forgiveness to human beings has always been to change people internally and to do so independently and graciously in order that they pursue obedience to him on the basis of authentic, biblical inwardness. Thus, the "one who loves" becomes such by divine miracle. Once God changes him on the inside, he can then seek to forgive those who have hurt him and to fight for them to accept his forgiveness and become loving like him, even if they are currently unwilling to do so. For this reason, Kierkegaard goes on to define the person of a "true conciliatory spirit" with this statement—"when the one who does not, note well, need forgiveness is the one who offers reconciliation."

Again, Kierkegaard draws our attention to the seemingly upside-down nature of these biblical concepts. "So the one who loves fights in a conciliatory spirit to win the one overcome." However, it is this last phrase, "*To win the one who has been overcome,*" that is enigmatic and appears inverted. "One should think that to win would be inferior to overcome, because 'over' indeed suggests something that surpasses winning." True

enough. We would definitely expect such a distinction between “win” and “overcome,” but Kierkegaard explains, “From the standpoint of pride, it perhaps is greater to overcome; but from the standpoint of love... , ‘to win the one overcome’” is greater. He calls this “a beautiful conflict (more beautiful than a lovers’ quarrel)” and “a wonderful inversion,” but then also this is “a beautiful victory, the most beautiful of all victories, when the one who loves succeeds in winning the one overcome!”

Kierkegaard asks us if we now understand “the double victory that this discourse is about?” The first victory is when the one who loves overcomes evil with good and, thus, perseveres in doing good even after become weary and discouraged. Thus, the first battle has ended with the loving one’s having “overcome” the unloving one—even if nothing has changed in the relationship. “He continues to stand after having overcome everything.” Now the second battle begins where “his fall is only too close at hand if he does not permit love and religious consideration to lead him immediately into the next battle, to win the one overcome.” If he moves into this next battle, then he resists allowing pride to convince him that persevering “in repaying evil with good” was sufficient so that he would feel his own self-importance by not having stooped to the level of his adversary and repaid evil with evil. It is important to understand that the world would stop here, but the biblical message keeps going—into winning the one overcome, into encouraging the one who needs forgiveness to accept forgiveness.

“When you promptly enter the next battle, who then becomes important? Is it not the one you are striving to win? You, then, are not the more important.” Plus, only true love can endure such a humiliating reversal of fortune. We all want to be the most important. And to make my enemy more important by immediately taking up the second battle of winning him into accepting my forgiveness is to make him more important—a true blow to my pride. In this process, we seem to be going backward while moving forward. “[W]hen one has oneself overcome everything” by holding evil at bay and doing only good, then “the one overcome has become more important.”

Suppose the prodigal son’s brother had been willing to do everything for his brother in welcoming him home from his debauched pursuits, but there was one thing the brother could not get into his head—that the prodigal brother should be more important. Surely the brother can point to his outward act of welcoming the sinful prodigal as a good and noble act, worthy of applause and admiration. However, if applause and admiration are the focus of the brother’s efforts, he demonstrates that he is unwilling to move from the first battle into the second. He admires his own self-importance in his having loved his wayward brother and not having succumbed to evil himself, but the biblical message is not only about doing what is good. It is also about encouraging others to value being forgiven—both by God and by people. Still, such embracing of forgiveness by human beings requires setting aside their pride and humbling themselves before both God and others.

Kierkegaard goes on to say, “*But to win one who has been overcome is always difficult and in the relationship of which we speak has a peculiar difficulty.*” What is the difficulty? Here Kierkegaard demonstrates his excellent grasp of human psychology—“To be one who has been overcome” (because after fighting with the help of evil, he has not been able to convince the loving one also to fight with this same weapon, but instead he keeps fighting with the help of goodness and love) “is a humiliating feeling. Therefore, one who has been overcome prefers to avoid the one who overcame him.” He does not want to have to admit to the one who has continued loving him that he has overcome him by not giving in to evil. However, if the one overcome is avoiding the one who has overcome him, then, in order “to win the one overcome,” the two are going to have to be brought together somehow. But how? Certainly not by allowing “the unloving one” to believe “that he was right in the evil he did,” which would be treachery by strengthening

him in his evil. “No, it is of importance, it is part of love’s work, that with the help of the loving one it becomes entirely clear to the unloving one how irresponsibly he has acted so that he deeply feels his wrong. This the loving person must do, and then he wants also to win the one overcome.”

Kierkegaard says that such winning is not an “also.” Instead, it should be seen as one and the same thing with the overcoming. To have overcome the unloving one by doing good, thus communicating to him what evil he has done, and then to move on immediately to the second battle of helping the unloving one to accept the forgiveness of the one whom he has wronged is, in the final analysis, one and the same thing. In other words, while we can talk about two battles, the Bible actually sees them both as only one, because the truly loving one understands God’s forgiveness of him and wants to express the same kind of forgiveness to all others. The problem is that “the more deeply the one overcome feels his wrong and in that way also his defeat, the more he of course must feel” like avoiding “the one who lovingly” and mercifully reveals his wrongdoing to him. Such dynamics in a relationship are peculiarly difficult for the loving one—“at one and the same time to be as rigorous as truth requires” by letting the unloving one know just how unloving he has been “and yet as gentle as love desires in order to win the one against whom” this level of severity has been employed. Kierkegaard admits that the only way that these efforts will succeed is by a miracle of God. To be truthful and offend the unloving one while also drawing him into love’s environment requires God to change him inwardly—as the passages from Deuteronomy and Titus revealed above.

Kierkegaard analyzes this process some more. What exactly does the loving one want? Does he want only to overcome the unloving one by continuing to do good towards him (to win the first battle)? No. He also wants to win the unloving one “for the good and the true” and without humiliating his opponent (to win the second battle). In addition, “[t]he one who loves does not give the impression at all, nor does it occur to him, that it is he who has conquered, that he is the victor.” Instead, he realizes and is ready and willing to admit that “it is the good that has conquered,” i.e., God who has done so, which is to introduce “something higher between himself and the unloving one.” In this way, he “removes himself. When there is not a third party in the relationship between human beings, every such relationship becomes unhealthy, either too ardent [passionate] or embittered [frustrating].” In other words, without God in between the two who are in conflict, there is no mitigating and calming factor to keep the relationship on the right road towards reconciliation and forgiveness. It becomes what “I” want and how “I” want the conflict to end—to my advantage, of course; but when God stands in between the two, then the loving one humbles himself before God, and, hopefully, the unloving one does also. If both of these occur, “then there of course is nothing humiliating for either one of them,” because they both are ultimately accepting God’s forgiveness and, therefore, stand on an equal plane with each other.

“Thus the one who loves also hides something from the one overcome.” He hides himself lest he communicate any superiority to the unloving one whom he has overcome with goodness and love. Even if the unloving one expresses his “grief over the past” and his “sorrow over his wrong” with “pleas for forgiveness,” the loving one indicates that it is not he who is owed such sorrow and pleas. Instead, it is God to whom they are due. Kierkegaard calls the loving one’s perspective “*holy* modesty, which is inseparable from all true love.” This “holy modesty originates because there is a God, and in modesty one feels one’s lowliness.” After all, as the apostle Paul says, we are merely clay pots fashioned by the master potter, God (cf. Romans 9:21-24). It is to God that all of us are ultimately accountable, not to one another. Thus, the “thought of God’s presence makes a person modest in relation to another person, because the presence of God makes the two essentially equal.” Because of such equality, even the one who loves “hardly dares

to lift his eyes to look at the one overcome.” He is not so proud as to think that he has any right to look at his equal, even if his equal is the unloving one who has wronged him.

*“Therefore the one who loves does not look at the one overcome. This was the first thing; this was to prevent humiliation. But in another sense the one who loves does look at him. This is the next thing.”*

Kierkegaard now finds it difficult to express what he wants to communicate. “Would that I could describe how the one who loves looks at the one overcome, how joy beams from his eyes, how this loving look rests so gently on him, how it seeks, alluring and inviting, to win him!” This is because the loving one is so concerned to win the one overcome that he dare not allow anything to hinder it from happening, and what will contribute to winning the one overcome is if “the eternal” creates a “calmness” in the loving one. Such calmness may look to others like “weakness,” but his “strength must be in weakness”—the weakness of comprehending the magnificence of God’s forgiveness of him and his expectation that such forgiveness results eventually in eternal life. The “loving one knows only all too well how difficult it is to woo” a person, particularly the unloving person, in this way. It is always difficult “to free someone from evil, to free him from being humiliated by being the one overcome, to free him from thinking sadly of the forgiveness he needs,” and finally “to win his love.” The loving one knows this best, because at some point in his own life he has had to wrestle with his pride and unwillingness to humble himself before God.

Kierkegaard concludes, “Yet the one who loves succeeds in winning the one overcome.” Really? Does such a response from the one overcome always follow naturally and necessarily from the love of the loving one? Can he always count on the one who has wronged him and who needs his forgiveness, which he freely gives because he is the loving one, to accept his forgiveness and love him in return? Or once again, as we have seen over and over in this book, is Kierkegaard speaking of the ideal? Yes, unless it is an unrealistic tendency towards pessimism in me (and I do not think that it is), this kind of explanation demonstrates Kierkegaard’s literary method—to write about the ideal and hope that the reader will at least pursue it. However, ultimately, reconciliation and forgiveness in a relationship between two people who are in conflict with one another will happen only if eternity, i.e., God, performs a miracle within the unloving one. Certainly God *can* perform such a miracle—whenever he wants, which is exactly the point. God, through his eternal plans and purposes, is in control of when people choose to act towards others with love and forgiveness. Nevertheless, God’s control of reality does not release us from our moral obligation to make the choice of being a loving one. It only encourages us that certain people will definitely make this choice when God so determines. We just do not know when it will happen and must keep pursuing love and forgiveness in the meantime.

Therefore, while we allow Kierkegaard to be rather idealistic, he goes on to describe what the relationship and conversation will be like between these two individuals who have obtained reconciliation after their conflict, “Everything disturbing, every conceivable hindrance is removed as if by magic” (that is to say, by the grace and miracle of God!!!). The “one overcome seeks to receive forgiveness,” and “the loving one seeks to gain the love of the one overcome.” In addition, the conversation between them involves questions but no explicit answers. The one overcome asks, “Have you really forgiven me now?” Then, the one who loves answers, “Do you truly love me now?” This exchange of questions that results from uncertainty sounds like a great ending to a Hollywood movie, does it not? Kierkegaard adds that the latter person, the loving one, certainly does not respond—because “he is too loving for that.” Interesting. “He does even want to answer the question about forgiveness, because this word, especially if emphasis is laid on it, could easily make the matter too earnest in a damaging sense.”



How could answering this question damage the relationship? My guess is that Kierkegaard believes that we cannot make absolutely definitive statements about even our own intentions and motives. Why is this the case? Because we are all a mixed bag of motives. Our intentions are never pure—this side of eternity. Yes, we would like to say that we love someone. However, do we love him with absolutely pure motives and intentions? Not in the present realm. Therefore, it is better not to answer the question in the moment and instead, over the course of time, let someone watch our behavior that demonstrates the fundamental nature of our intentions. Just as the Bible says that it is the *perseverance* of our faith that truly matters, i.e., that God cares about, so also it is the perseverance of our love and not just the momentary display of love by answering the question in the affirmative that is important—which is true love.

How much sense does this explanation actually make? Even Kierkegaard goes on to say, “What a wonderful conversation” that these two people are having who are merely asking each other questions. “There seems to be no sense to it; they seem to be speaking at cross-purposes, and yet they are speaking about the same thing, as love indeed understands.” Still, the one who has been overcome asks, “Have you now really forgiven me?” And the loving one will answer, “Do you now really love me?” And Kierkegaard claims that “no one can hold out against one who loves, not even the one who begs for forgiveness,” if this were to be what “the unloving one” were to end up doing, because love had so broken him down that begging for mercy flowed naturally from within his inner being. “Finally,” Kierkegaard says, “he will be broken of the habit of asking about forgiveness.” Why? I assume because he becomes convinced simply by the other person’s actions and perseverance of doing the good that he really has forgiven him, even if he will not say so explicitly. “Thus he, the one who loves, has conquered because he won the one overcome.”

If only such a victory were true in each and every situation. Nevertheless, even if Kierkegaard is talking about only the ideal, loving and doing the good and loving the one who is unloving with “*the conciliatory spirit in love*” that looks to “*win the one overcome*” is still the right thing to do for God’s sake, eternity’s sake, and my sake—and the sake of the unloving one.

## Chapter IX

### The Work of Love in Recollecting One Who Is Dead

This chapter is perhaps the most unusual of the whole book. Therefore, let me just say that what Kierkegaard is doing is comparing loving a living person with loving a dead person. While at first this may sound a bit bizarre, we should once again permit Kierkegaard to lead us where he desires, even if it is into our relationships with loved ones who have already passed on ahead of us. Then, we should allow him to instruct us in what true, biblical love is by drawing upon the points that he makes in his discussion. There will be four—that true love is unselfish, that true love is free, that true love is faithful, and that these three characteristics are most easily found in our relationships with those who are already dead, thus providing us with a wonderful example of how to love those who are living.

Kierkegaard begins this chapter by saying that when we are overwhelmed by all the details of life, the best way to get a handle on our situation is to make a brief summary of life and what it is all about. What is the best way to make this summary? By considering death, “which is the briefest summary of life, or life traced back to its briefest form.” At first, this sounds like a rather strange statement. How can death, which is the opposite of life, summarize life? Kierkegaard claims, “No thinker grasps life as death does, this masterful thinker who is able not only to think through every illusion but is able to think it to pieces, think it to nothing.” It would seem that Kierkegaard considers the fact that our lives end, indeed end in death, to be the best way to bring us to the point where we can understand what life is all about, that is, to put life in perspective—because “all human beings” share “this kinship of death.” Some people may be rich; others may be poor; some may be tall; others may be short; but everyone must face the prospect of death. Just as the modern saying goes, there are only two certainties in life, death and taxes.

“Yes, go out to the dead once again, in order *there* [in the cemetery] to take an aim at life. Indeed, this is the way the rifleman acts; he seeks a place where the enemy cannot hit him but from which he can hit the enemy, and where he can have perfect quiet for taking aim. Do not choose an evening hour for your visit, because the quiet in the evening and in an evening spent among the dead is often not far from certain excitement that fatigues and ‘satiates with restlessness,’ raises new riddles instead of explaining the ones proposed.” Then Kierkegaard describes what was possible for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Dane living in Copenhagen, “No, go out there early in the morning when the sun is peeking through the branches with shifting lights and shadows, when the beauty and friendliness of the garden, when the chirping of the birds and the profusion of life out there almost make you forget that you are among the dead. It will seem to you as if you had entered a foreign country that had remained unacquainted with the confusion and fragmentation of life, in the state of childhood, consisting only of small families. Out here is attained what is futilely sought in life: equal distribution. Each family has its own piece of ground, approximately the same size. The view is just about the same for all of them; the sun shines equally over all of them; no building rises so high that it takes away the sun’s rays or the refreshing rain or the fresh air of the wind or the reverberations of bird songs from the neighbor or the neighbor across the way. No, here there is equal distribution.”

Thus, death becomes the great equalizer even if governments cannot become such for their living citizens. In the Danish cemetery of which Kierkegaard is speaking, “all the families have had to limit themselves” to an approximately equal amount of land in which their family members are buried. Kierkegaard points out that the family plots in the cemetery might vary in size by “perhaps a foot..., or one family may have a tree that

another” does not. Why the difference, even so small? Because “[t]hat is how loving death is! It is simply love on the part of death that by means of this little difference it calls to mind, in an inspiring jest, the great difference.” What does Kierkegaard mean by “the great difference”? We shall see. For the time being, he only says that this is like our childhoods where little differences felt like large differences. The little differences in childhood intimated that there would be large differences in adulthood, but it these large differences that love must overcome, or even ignore, in order for love to be true, biblical love. And loving the dead becomes the best example of how to do this.

Since death is a “brief summary” of life, Kierkegaard believes that he cannot leave “this occasion to make a test of what love really is,” which is accomplished by ascertaining “what love there is in you or in another person,” and is best done by paying attention “to how [a person] relates himself to one who is dead.” Then, Kierkegaard takes a slight turn and talks about what is really involved in knowing a person well. “If one wishes to observe a person [and know him well], it is very important for the sake of the observation that one...look at him alone.” In other words, when you are looking at someone to know who he is, it is vital that nothing distract you. Otherwise, you will not see him clearly and carefully, and, interestingly enough, that which is most likely to obscure your view is yourself. The strong influence of your issues will make the other person appear different from who he actually is. Therefore, Kierkegaard says that what is necessary is a “double accounting.” First, you must account for yourself and how you are affecting your ability to observe clearly the other person. Then, second, you must account for the other person, but by first accounting for yourself, you will account for and observe the other person accurately. It seems to me that the situation where such self-accounting is most difficult is when a narcissistic person is looking at someone else. The narcissist’s view of others is so tainted by his own issues that he simply cannot see clearly who people are. He always reads his own thoughts and feelings into them by ignoring theirs and imposing his on them.

Kierkegaard himself cites two examples of eliminating the other person from the equation. One of them is this. “[I]f you could prevail upon a dancer to dance solo the dance he customarily dances with another, you would be able to observe his motions best, better...than if he were dancing with another actual person.” In the same way, “if, in conversation with someone, you understand the art of making yourself *no one*, you get to know best what resides in this person,” which seems rather hypothetical, because how exactly can a person make himself a “*no one*,” i.e., make himself not exist—at least in the present realm. We can see where Kierkegaard is going with his discussion.

He then comments that “when a person relates himself to one who is dead, there is only one in this relationship, inasmuch as one who is dead” does not actually exist. Thus, “no one, no one can make himself *no one* as well as one who is dead, because he is *no one*.” He does not exist in this realm. The result is that the “one who is living is disclosed” completely and accurately, because “he must show himself exactly as he is.” The reason such disclosure takes place is because the “one who is dead (he is indeed a cunning fellow) has withdrawn himself completely, and he has not the slightest influence, neither disturbing nor accommodating, on the one living who relates himself to him.” Thus, we can see that the ultimate way to reduce the influence that my issues will have on my observing another person is to die. Not only do I not exist, but neither do my issues that plagued me while I was alive and prevented me from seeing people completely accurately. Correspondingly, when I am loving someone who is dead, who is a “*no one*,” I am revealed for who I really am, because the one who is dead and, therefore, completely inactive can have no direct influence on me.

Kierkegaard continues, “We certainly do have duties also to the dead.” If we are obligated to love people who are alive, then we are also obligated to love “those we have

seen but see no more because death took them away.” However, the way we love the dead should be with a certain decorum and respectability. “We ought not to disturb the dead by wailing and crying... I know of no better way to describe true recollection than by...soft weeping that does not burst into sobs at one moment—and soon subsides. No, we are to recollect the dead, weep softly, but weep long.” Thus, he states what is at the heart of the work of love towards the dead. It is remembering them, but he is saying that the remembrance must be accomplished with an element of restraint. Soft weeping, even long, soft weeping is most appropriate, not loud crying that could possibly “disturb the dead” (as if this were even possible?). However, one question is, how long will the soft weeping last? Kierkegaard says that it cannot be determined, “because no one recollecting [the dead] can know for sure how long he will be separated from the one dead.” Then, Kierkegaard borrows from Psalm 137 where David speaks of recollecting Jerusalem, “If I forget you, [O Jerusalem], then forget my right hand...” Therefore, remembering those who have passed on and thus loving them must continue as long as we, the living, are still alive. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard also suggests that it may be best that we who are “recollecting” remain silent as that which is most appropriate and respectful towards the dead.

Yes, Kierkegaard says, “it is a duty to recollect the dead,” but the “untrustworthiness of human feelings left to their own devices perhaps never manifests itself more than in this very relationship.” In other words, more often than not, a person expresses his feelings towards someone who has just died and then later expresses different feelings that make the former rather untrue, or at least qualified by the latter. His former feelings may have been true at the time of death, but now he feels differently—for whatever reason. For example, his feelings at the moment of death of a loved one may be deep grief and sorrow as he experiences the depth of his loss, but later these feelings could turn into anger or relief when the loss begins to unveil all the dynamics, even negative ones, that existed in his relationship with the loved one while he was still alive.

Kierkegaard then claims that one “often speaks of what a completely different view of human life one would have if everything that life conceals were made manifest.” If we knew all that is happening in every human being’s existence in this world at any one moment, or if we consciously and completely grasped every element, positive and negative, in our relationships with others, then how different we would think and feel about our own lives. Since death is the best “summary of life,” then “if death were to come out with what it knows about the living, what a terrible contribution to the knowledge of human nature, a contribution that does not in the least promote love of humanity!” I assume this is because human beings are rather flawed in their ability to love others. Therefore, it is probably best that we not know everything that is going on in every person’s mind and heart at every moment of time. If we did, it would probably crush us. So we should remain content with only the limited knowledge that we have of what is happening in the realm of the living and certainly not even ask death to reveal more than it already does in those who are relating to the dead.

Kierkegaard now begins his discussion of the four points that he will make in this chapter. His first one is, “Therefore, among the works of love, let us not forget this one, let us not forget to consider: *the work of love in recollecting one who is dead. The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is a work of the **most unselfish** love.*” Notice that Kierkegaard is claiming that the act of loving another person, but not just any person, no, but the person who is dead, is the most unselfish kind of love. Why is he “most unselfish?” Because “[w]hen one wants to make sure that love is completely unselfish, one” should “of course remove every possibility of repayment,” i.e., of the person’s having the ability or the opportunity to pay you back. “But this is exactly what is removed in the relationship to one who is dead.”

Thus, Kierkegaard clarifies why loving someone who is dead is “a *work of the most unselfish love*.” He reminds us that “[r]epayment in connection with love can be quite varied.” A person who loves another can expect to gain something from his love, whatever this gain may look like. In this sense, the repayment is “different from the love itself.” It is actually in addition to the love; but there is a repayment that is the same as love. Kierkegaard calls this “reciprocal love” that takes the form of “gratitude, of appreciation, [and] of devotion.” Yet, some may want to argue that even this repayment makes love selfish. Therefore, it is important to see that “in no sense does the one who is dead make repayment,” because he can no longer act and do anything in return for the love he receives from the living.

Such lack of ability to reciprocate means that “lovingly recollecting one who is dead” is similar to “parents’ love for their children. Parents love their children almost before they come into existence and long before they become conscious beings, therefore as nonbeings. However, a dead person is also a nonbeing, and the two greatest good works are these: to give a human being life and to recollect one who is dead.” Nevertheless, Kierkegaard is quick to add that “the first work of love has a repayment,” because the parents will experience some payback from their children for the loving devotion that they provide them in their childhoods. Then Kierkegaard also asserts that if “parents had no hope whatever” of ever receiving any joy from their children and the love they give them, many fathers and mothers would still “lovingly do everything” for their children. It is also true that there “would...be many a father and mother whose love would grow cold,” which does not make them completely unloving but only weak in their love while perhaps still being hopeful that whatever love they have given to their children will pay off in the future and their children will repay them with some degree of love in return.

“But [the fact remains that] the one who is dead makes no repayment.” Therefore, the one who lovingly remembers the dead has to conclude that it is absolutely a hopeless and thankless task. For example, the one who is dead does not “grow toward the future as a child does; one who is dead merely crumbles away more and more into certain ruin. This is to say that “[o]ne who is dead does not give joy to the one recollecting as the child gives joy to the mother” when she asks him whom he loves the most and he answers—Mother. “One who is dead loves no one best; he seems to love no one at all. Oh, it is so disheartening that he remains quiet this way down there in the grave, while the longing for him intensifies, so disheartening that there is no thought of any change except the change of decomposition, more and more!” It is also true that he is not “difficult the way a child can be at times; he does not cause sleepless nights, at least not by being difficult.” Perhaps his actions while he was alive caused a certain amount of difficulty in the life of the one who is recollecting him, and maybe his actions are still having repercussions such that they are still causing difficulties. However, the fact of the matter is that right now, while he lies in the ground and is both speechless and inactive, he is not *directly* causing any difficulty per se. In addition, “even with the most difficult child there is still the hope and the prospect of the repayment of reciprocal love, but one who is dead makes no repayment whatever, whether you are sleepless and [anxious] because of him or you completely forget him, it seems to make no difference at all to him.” After all, he is dead and cannot respond to you at all!

“If, then, you wish to test yourself as to whether you love unselfishly, just pay attention to how you relate yourself to one who is dead.” Kierkegaard claims that most love between human beings is a kind of self-love, which is a *selfish* love (cf. Chapter IIB, “You Shall Love *the Neighbor*”). Self-love is the same kind of love that hopes for “the prospect of repayment, at least the repayment of reciprocal love, and ordinarily this repayment does come.” The hope of repayment tends to obscure whether it is in the

midst of true, biblical love or self-love. If the hope of repayment includes a willingness to forgo completely any repayment, then we are talking about love as it should be; but if the expectation requires that repayment be made or the person cannot keep loving, then we are talking about self-self, or *selfish* love. “But in the relationship to one who is dead, the observation [of what kind of love we are talking about] is very easy,” because the one who is dead cannot repay in any way at all. Therefore, to love the one who is dead is “a work of the **most unselfish** love.” In fact, Kierkegaard claims that “if human beings were accustomed to love unselfishly,” they would even love the dead differently just after a person dies. Instead of “crying and clamor,” there would be calm and solace as they would just let the person be dead, with no hope ever again in the present realm of repayment from him. Obviously, again he is speaking of the ideal.

Kierkegaard goes on to his second point that he will make in this chapter by stating, “*The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is a work of the freest love.*” If one desires “to test properly whether love is entirely free, one can of course remove everything that could in any way extort [i.e., to some degree forcibly cause] from one a work of love.” However, is this even remotely possible in a relationship between two living people? Indeed, it seems to me to be impossible in all practicality. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard is suggesting that a person try to eliminate any factor in his relationship with a living person that might possibly cause him to love the person. However, this is really only possible “in the relationship to one who is dead. If love still continues, then this is the freest love.” There are many things that can elicit a response of love from people—the “child cries, the pauper begs, the widow pesters [cf. Luke 18:1-8], deference constrains, misery compels, etc. But any work of love that is extorted in this way is not free.”

Kierkegaard also claims that the “stronger the compelling [by the one who is being loved], the less free is the love.” He cites the example of an “infant that lies there in all its helplessness” while its parents look on. The child “*seemingly* extorts” love from his parents, but certainly this is in the case of only parents “who are not what they ought to be.” In other words, only evil and cruel parents who would be so callous toward the needs of their helpless infant that they would have to be forced to respond with love to its cries. Kierkegaard wants us to consider the “infant, then, in all its helplessness!” But then he goes one, “And yet, when an individual first lies in his grave with six feet of earth over him, he is more helpless than the child!”—because he can do nothing for himself.

“But the child cries!” Is it possible, though, that “many a father and mother...would, at least many times, forget the child” if he did not cry? Yes, which would only demonstrate that “the love in them [is] still so weak, so self-loving, that they would need this reminder [of the baby’s crying], this compelling.” Then, Kierkegaard points out that the one who is dead “does not cry as the child does; he does not call attention to himself as the needy do, he does not beg as the beggar, he does not constrain by means of deference, he does not compel by means of visible misery, he does not pester you as the widow pesters the judge—the one who is dead is silent and says not a word; he remains absolutely still and does not stir from the spot.” In other words, there is “no one who inconveniences the living less than the one who is dead, and there is no one easier for the living to avoid and not love than one who is dead.” You can “leave your child” with a babysitter “in order not hear its crying.” You can ignore the beggar to avoid his beseeching. You can even wear a disguise to avoid interacting with people you know—“in short, in connection with the living you can use” all sorts of devices to protect you from them so that you feel the least amount of compulsion to love them, “but in connection with one who is dead you do not need the slightest precaution and you are still entirely protected.” You cannot interact with him, and he cannot interact with you. He

is dead and gone from the current world, therefore losing all ability and power in and of himself to compel you to love him.

“If someone is so inclined, if it best suits his purpose to be rid of one who is dead, the sooner the better, he can...turn cold at approximately the same moment that one dead has become cold.” Plus, the one living can do this “without being challenged” or incurring any lawsuit. Certainly the one who is still alive might want to weep a little and attend the funeral of the one who is dead—simply out of “common decency,” but the “[o]ne who is dead of course has no rights in life.” Kierkegaard is not talking about executing the desires of the one who is dead according to his will. In this sense, he still has “rights in life” even though he is dead. What Kierkegaard means is that “there is no public authority who deals with whether you are recollecting one who is dead,” no public authority who requires that you take any more time than you want to think of the dead and remember them—the same way that public authorities may be concerned about the “relationship between parents and children.” In the light of such lack of public accountability, Kierkegaard can say, “Therefore, if you want to test whether you love freely, just watch how over a period of time you relate to one who is dead.

“If it did not seem so much like jesting (which it assuredly is not except to someone who does not know what earnestness is), I would suggest that over the gate to the [cemetery] there be placed an inscription: ‘No Compulsion Here’ or ‘With Us No Compulsion.’” Kierkegaard now wants to connect the idea of death with that of eternity. The word “earnestness” is his way of pointing to the eternal, because earnestness implies a passion for eternal life. The earnest person will in no way consider it a jest or joke to place these inscriptions over the gate to a cemetery, because he understands something very important about death. “Death is not earnest in the same way as the eternal is.” Death by itself “is an empty, often brazen, jest.” When people consider death apart from the eternal, it can seem like a joke; but, “together with the thought of the eternal,” death is what it should be—a concept specifically for “earnestness” that points us to God and, therefore, to his gift of eternal life after death.

Kierkegaard continues describing the situation in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Denmark, “There is so much talk in the world about the necessity for love to be free, that one cannot love as soon as there is the slightest compulsion, that with regard to love there must be no constraint at all.” This apparently was the way the pastors of the Danish state church were describing biblical love—that in order for people to love in a Christian way, they must do so freely, spontaneously, and without any thought of being compelled by the people whom they loved. However, Kierkegaard reminds the reader that “free love” is “how the dead are recollected in love, since one who is dead in no way compels anyone.” There are also stages of loving the one who is dead. When the latter first dies, “when one cannot get along without the one who is dead” and the feeling of loss is most acute, “there is crying.” Then, “little by little, as the one dead gradually crumbles away, so does the recollection crumble away between the fingers.” However, does this make one free of love so that this is free love? Kierkegaard states the proverb, “Out of sight, out of mind.” Then, he claims that this proverb may speak the truth about how things operate in the world; nevertheless, “it is quite another matter that in the Christian sense every proverb is untrue.” Why is this the case? Because such proverbs pertain to the present world only. Christianity includes the next world, eternity. Thus, to have stopped recollecting the one who is dead because he is “out of mind” may be permissible with respect to the world, but it is not with respect to Christianity and eternity.

Kierkegaard is making the point that when human beings love one another in the present world, “there usually is something compelling” them to do so. Their love is not free in the true sense of this word. It could even be that they love one another simply out of “daily sight and habit if nothing else.” Thus, one cannot really identify if love “freely

holds its object firm” or if it is the object of love that somehow is compelling the other person to love. Love between two living persons is simply too difficult to analyze in order to conclude if the love is free or not. However, the same is not true when a person relates to someone who is dead. In this case, there is “nothing, nothing compelling at all.” There is nothing that the one who is dead is *doing* at any moment to compel the one who is living to love him, because he is not *doing* anything. The result is that the person who loves the one who is dead by remembering him must protect himself from two powerful influences that would dissuade him from doing so—other living human beings and time. In the case of the former, the fact that they actually exist provides the loving person with “ever-new impressions” that could “wipe out the recollection” of the one who is dead so that he completely forgets him. In other words, our relationships with the living could eventually become so numerous and involved that they could completely overshadow any memory of the dead.

The second force is time. “The power of time is great,” and “time is a dangerous power.” This is to say that it is easy to begin a project that one is trying to accomplish “and then forget where one left off” if one does not complete it and leaves it for a long time. For example, one can begin to read a big book, get so far, place the book down, and some time later pick it up to continue and have forgotten where one left off, which is why “one puts a mark in the book. Ah, but with regard to one’s life [i.e., one’s life’s projects], how often a person forgets to put in marks in order to be able to take notice properly!” Then there is the one who is dead. He does nothing to help one recollect him. Instead, he does just exactly this, nothing! It is as if he is completely indifferent to whether a person remembers him or not. Meanwhile, our fellow living human beings are constantly beckoning: “Come to us; we will like you.” They cannot get enough of our love and are constantly using all sorts of devices to move us to love them. “The one dead, however, cannot beckon; even if it were his desire, he cannot beckon, he can do nothing at all to bind us to himself, he cannot move a finger; he lies there and crumbles away—how easy for the powers of life and of the moment” to shove the recollection of the dead out of our minds, especially when he is too weak to compel us in any way to remember him. “Therefore no love is as free as the work of love that *recollects* one who is dead—because to recollect him is something different from not being able to forget him at first.” At first, we cannot stop remembering the one who has just died, because the loss is either so painful or, in some cases, so joyful. Remembering in this situation happens spontaneously. However, over time it will be easier to forget the one dead and therefore will require intention and decision to do so. Because the one who is dead can in no way compel, we will have to choose *freely* to love him by recollecting him.

Now, Kierkegaard addresses the third point that he is making in this chapter by saying, “*The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is a work of the most faithful love.*” To be faithful is to continue to love someone regardless of circumstances. The test of faithfulness can be achieved by removing every incentive for someone to be loving. Obviously, the greatest test, therefore, is in the case of the “one who is dead, who is no *actual* object,” i.e., who does not exist in the current realm anymore.

“Not infrequently there is talk about lack of faithfulness in love between people,” and this lack is usually attributed to one or the other person’s changing—for the worse. “So the one blames the other and says, ‘It was not I who changed; it was he who changed.’” Really? Does such a claim mean that the person speaking actually did not change? Of course not, because he went from loving the other person faithfully to not loving him, even though it perhaps was the other person who was unfaithful first. Thus, this person must also admit, “No of course it was natural and a necessary consequence that I changed too.” Kierkegaard calls this response “meaningless,” because it certainly does not follow that it was a “necessary consequence” that a person changes merely



“*because* another changes.” Let us put this in the context of a “relationship to someone who is dead.” Here, “it is out of the question that it was the one dead who changed.” We might want to say, though, that the one who is dead certainly did change. He died! But Kierkegaard is talking about after the person has died. Does he change after this—except to continue to crumble away as Kierkegaard has talked about? No. Therefore, if “a change occurs in this relationship, I must be the one who has changed,” which is why “if you want to test whether you love faithfully, just observe how you relate yourself to one who is dead.”

“But this is the issue,” Kierkegaard forcibly declares. It is “truly a difficult task to maintain oneself unchanged in time” in our relationships with others, whether they are living or dead. People “love to deceive themselves in all kinds of delusions more than they love both the living and the dead. Oh, how many go on living in the firm conviction, which they would stake their lives on, that if the other one had not changed, they, too, would have remained unchanged.” Plus, what about the relationship to “one who is dead? Oh, perhaps in no relationship is the change as noticeable and as great as in the relationship between one who is living and one who is dead.” However, in this case we know that “the one who is dead is certainly not the one who changes.” He cannot be once he has died. He remains the same, inactive, in relation to the ones who are living.

“When two people who are living hold together in love,” they are in “alliance” with one another. “But no alliance is possible with one who is dead.” Certainly, just after he has died it would seem that the “alliance” that he had enjoyed with the living one continues to exist so that “he is recollected during this time.” However, as time continues, he loses his grip, his “alliance,” on the one who is still living, and the one who is still living “does not hold on to him.” Still, is not “faithfulness” defined by our holding onto the other person regardless of the circumstances?

“When death separates two people, the surviving—faithful—one at first declares that he ‘will never forget the departed one.’” Kierkegaard considers this to be a rather reckless statement, because in real life we say this to people who are alive and then over the course of time forget them. We forget them to the point that neither one remembers one of them saying that he would never forget the other. However, Kierkegaard calls the one who is dead a “resolute and determined man; he is not like the rest of us still in search of adventures” that will bring us excitement and stimulation so that we “seventeen times forget what we have said.” The one who is dead hears us (so to speak) say that we will never forget him, and he then responds, “Fine! Rest assured that I will never forget that you have said it.” He can make such a statement, so to speak, because he *never changes*. We may change, but he does not. He remains completely inactive in his death.

For example, you “will not be able to say to the one who is dead that it was he who has grown older and this explains your changed relationship to him... You will not be able to say to” him that he became cold in his feelings toward you so that his coldness explains your changed relationship to him. “Nor will you be able to say that it was he who has become uglier and that is why you could not love him anymore... Nor will you be able to say that it was he who became involved with others—because one who is dead does not become involved with others,” which means that you always begin again with the one who is dead exactly where you had left off. You move neither backwards nor forwards. You always are exactly where you were before.

Thus, the “one who is dead is a strong man” even if he does not show his strength in a very demonstrable way. His strength is in his “changelessness.” The one who is dead is also “a proud man.” Kierkegaard defines pride by a person’s showing no hint that he deeply scorns another person. He pretends as though nothing has happened “in order to consign the scorned one to sinking deeper and deeper” into his error. He does not want

him to turn away from doing wrong and become better. He wants him to destroy himself with his own evil. "Oh, but the one who is dead—who is as proudly able as he to give no hint at all, even if he scorns the one living who forgets him and his farewell words—after all, one who is dead does everything to make himself forgotten!" You never hear again from the one who is dead. Even if you see him as a corpse, his countenance gives you no indication of how he thinks of you, because his face is immovable. Yes, "the most dreadful thing is just this, that one who is dead gives no hint of anything at all. Therefore fear one who is dead, fear his ingenuity, fear his firmness, fear his strength, fear his pride! But if you love him, then recollect him lovingly and you have no reason to fear. From one who is dead, and precisely from him who is dead, you will learn the ingenuity in thought, the firmness of expression, the strength of changelessness, the pride in life that you would not be able to learn in this way from any other person, not even the most highly gifted."

The bottom line here, Kierkegaard tells us, is that the "[o]ne who is dead does not change." As a result, "there is no thought of any possibility of excuse by putting the blame on him" of the break in a relationship after he has been dead, which is the "great difference" that death calls to mind that Kierkegaard spoke of at the beginning of the chapter. The one who is dead "is faithful," because he never changes, while those who are still living cannot help but change in some way or another during their lives. "Yes, it is true, but [the one who is dead] is no actuality," i.e., he does not exist in the present realm, "and he therefore does nothing, nothing at all, in order to hold on to you, but he is not changed. If, then, any change takes place between one living and one dead, it is indeed clear that it must be the one living who has changed. On the other hand, if no change takes place, then it is the one living who has truly been faithful, faithful in lovingly recollecting him." This is in the midst of the peculiarity of the one who is dead, that "he could do nothing to hold on to you" and also "did everything to make it seem as if he had completely forgotten you and what you had said to him" about never forgetting him. "The one who actually has forgotten what has been said to him cannot express more definitely that it is forgotten," indeed "that the whole relationship" is forgotten, "than can the one who is dead."

Now, Kierkegaard draws his conclusion, his fourth point, about love from this whole discussion. "The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is thus a work of the most unselfish, the freest, the most faithful love. Therefore go out and practice it; recollect the one who is dead and just in this way learn to love the living unselfishly, freely, faithfully. In the relationship to one who is dead, you have the criterion by which you can test yourself." The result is that the "one who uses this criterion will easily be able to" avoid "the whole mass of excuses" that people use for claiming that the other person is selfish, that he has caused himself to be forgotten, that he is faithless and, therefore, he is to blame for the failure in the relationship.

"Recollect the one who is dead; then in addition to the blessing that is inseparable from this work of love you will also have the best guidance for rightly understanding life: that it is our duty to love the people we do not see but also those we do see. The duty to love the people we see cannot cease because death separates them from us, because the duty is eternal; but accordingly neither can the duty to those who are dead separate the living from us in such a way that they do not become the objects of our love." This is to say that death should not prevent us from loving those whom we loved while they were still living, and the dead should not prevent us from loving those who are still living. Indeed, our unselfish, free, and faithful love for the dead provides us with the best and purest example of how to love the living.

## Chapter X

### The Work of Love in Praising Love

Kierkegaard begins this chapter by comparing the writing of poetry with the performing of loving actions and cites the proverb—"To say it is no art, but to do it is." In other words, to write poetry is definitely an "art," because not everyone has the talent to do so. In contrast, love is not an "art," because all human beings are capable of loving, even in a biblical way—if God so grants them the grace to do so. This is to say that writing poetry is a talent, while doing biblical love towards others is not. I am not morally obligated to write poetry, and I write it only if I have the talent. However, I am morally obligated to love my neighbor regardless of what is my "talent," whether writing poetry, playing the violin, or shooting a basketball (to add a modern example).

What about "praising love," which is similar to writing poetry since it is a kind of "saying" and not doing? In other words, praising love, or talking about love in a way that describes and extols it, seems closer to writing poetry than it does to the actual act of loving my neighbor. Is praising love, therefore, only an "art" because there are only a few who are talented enough to do it—like writing poetry? Kierkegaard answers—No. He argues that praising love is like love itself. Everyone has the "talent," so to speak, to love his neighbor. It is "universally human," because it is a universal, moral obligation. Now that this is clear, Kierkegaard moves on to his discussion about "*the work of love in praising love*." Expressing admiration for love is of course a work of love, like mercy and forgiveness, because it can only be done "in the love of truth," that is, if a person genuinely loves truth, specifically the truth about God, the author of love.

The first statement that Kierkegaard makes in this discussion is that "[t]he work of praising love must be done **inwardly** in self-denial." His use of the word "inwardly" should not surprise us. Inwardness is Kierkegaard's drumbeat throughout his writings, the inwardness of an "infinite passion for the infinite," for the "eternal," for God and his promise of eternal life.<sup>1</sup> This decision to be inwardly committed to relating rightly to God is what defines for Kierkegaard the person of authentic, biblical faith. He goes on to say, "If praising love is to be done effectually, one must persevere for a long time in thinking one thought...with the most punctilious and obedient renunciation of every other thought." Trying to think about many things at once is distracting and unproductive, but to think of one thing, indeed, the most important thing, love, is the highest thinking that a human being can do. To think about love is to think about God, who is love, and there is nothing greater than God. However, Kierkegaard claims that thinking of this one thing, God, who is love, will turn a person inward to who he is as a moral being in need of forgiveness from God. Thus, "when a person thinks only one thought the direction is inward."

Kierkegaard also comments, "It is one thing to think in such a way that one's attention is continually only outward, in the direction of the object that is something external." Take, for example the chair you happen to be sitting on (if you are sitting). How would you describe it? What is its color, its fabric, its exact shape, etc.? The more that you think about the chair, the less you think about yourself, which is why Kierkegaard goes on to say, "[I]t is something else to be so turned in thought that continually, every moment, one is conscious, conscious of one's own state during the thinking or of what is happening in oneself during the thinking." Indeed, it is "something else" entirely. To be thinking about an external object is truly far different from thinking

<sup>1</sup> cf. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1992), pgs. 200-204, 385, 576

about oneself. Kierkegaard claims that “only the latter is essential thinking.” Really? Kierkegaard is saying that only thinking about myself is “essential thinking.” However, does such an idea not sound rather narcissistic and wrong? Then how can he claim that thinking “of what is happening in oneself during the thinking” is the only “essential thinking?” Because, as he says, this kind of thinking “is, namely, transparency.”

Kierkegaard addresses this concept in more detail in his book *The Sickness Unto Death*. Transparency is knowing oneself, being aware of exactly what is going on inside you morally and then dealing with it for the sake of eternity. Thus, “when the object of one’s thinking” is external, even if one is very talented in thinking about it—for example, a scientist who has studied and learned about the stars so that he is an expert in this subject—then one’s thinking “is still basically superficial,” regardless of how much the scientist knows about the stars. “When, on the other hand, a person thinks only one thought, then one does not have an external object, then one has an inward direction in self-deepening, then he must make a discovery concerning his own inner state, and this discovery is first very humbling.” Why is it humbling? Because the person comes face to face with his morally depraved condition before God and his inability to solve this problem apart from God’s grace and mercy. Therefore, to think one thought is to think only about one’s moral condition and need for God’s mercy, which is true inwardness and essential thinking for any human being. To think about more than one thing is to move from the inward to the outward, from pondering one’s inner being to pondering external objects. Thus, “essential thinking” is thinking only one thought—how I should rightly relate to God in the light of my moral depravity.

Then, Kierkegaard compares physical exertion with mental and spiritual exertion. “If someone works his physical powers overtime,” then he does not gain anything extra by doing so, except perhaps fatigue (obviously Kierkegaard did not live in a culture of athletic training and competition). “But if someone does not...strain his spiritual powers” in an inward direction, then he misses the most important thing that God wants him to discover, i.e., his fundamental need for God and his mercy. In other words, he does not discover God, which is a fascinating paradox, because it seems contradictory. One would think that to discover God who is outside the creation, that one’s thoughts ought to be directed outwardly, towards the transcendent God. Instead, the best and only way to discover God as he should be known is to direct one’s thoughts inwardly, into the humbling recesses of one’s moral condition whereby we should all realize that we desperately need God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Within the “human psyche as such there lies a selfishness that has to be broken if the God-relationship is truly to be won.” This selfishness is ordinary, universal human pride. Therefore, it is one’s pride that must be broken in order to discover God. “The person who thinks only one thought must learn this, must experience that there comes a halt in which everything seems to be taken away from him.” We human beings hold on for dear life to everything we have, because we equate our significance and sense of meaning and purpose with what we have. In addition, it is strenuous and difficult to look inward and to let go of what we naturally hold onto and that makes us feel good about ourselves. We look at ourselves superficially and see our talents, even if we have only one, and we pride ourselves in at least these few possessions. We look at our external possessions, even if we have only few, and we pride ourselves in at least what we have. We look at what we do for God, our religious practices and pursuits, even if we do only a few, and we pride ourselves in at least the few that we do. Kierkegaard is saying that there must come a “halt” to this thinking. We must stop thinking of only our talents, our possessions, and our religiosity. If we do not do so, we remain “superficial,” even as we copy everyone else in the use of their talents, the acquiring of their possessions, and their external religious practices. By remaining superficial, we become “comfortable in a

thoughtless life,” admired by everyone for being and doing just like them materially, spiritually, and religiously. It is only when a person “strains his spiritual powers” that he truly becomes an “instrument” of God and gains “the best powers,” but “they are not his own; he has them in *self-denial*.”

Kierkegaard continues his explanation, “When one thinks only one thought, one must in connection with this thinking discover self-denial, and it is self-denial that discovers God.” Then, in discovering God, a person acquires what Kierkegaard calls an “omnipotent one as a co-worker.” Kierkegaard then says that the discovery of this omnipotent co-worker enables you to realize that “you are able to do nothing at all,” because God’s very omnipotence puts your power and abilities in perspective. Since your power and abilities cannot exist without God’s causing them to exist, you are ultimately incapable of anything in and of yourself. Nevertheless, the opposite is true, too. If God is “your co-worker, you are able to do everything”—if he would choose for you to do so—which “is something you must be aware of at all times. At the same moment” that it seems that you can do everything, at that same moment you know that you could lose everything too. When you surrender your selfishness to God and give up everything, i.e., when you are “in *self-denial*,” then you also realize, like Abraham, that you can have it all back again—if God would so grant it (cf. Kierkegaard’s book *Fear and Trembling*). But how do you know if God will withhold from you what you give up or will give it back to you, because who understands the depths of the mind of God? “God is not seen, and therefore, as God uses this instrument into which a human being has made himself in self-denial,” it is tempting for the human being to think that he can do everything anytime he wants—until he again falls into a situation where he cannot help but realize that he is able to do nothing, because such a realization is what God desires at that moment, not his doing something.

Thus, Kierkegaard cries out, somewhat in despair, “It is hard enough to work with another human being, but to work together with the Omnipotent One!” To be God’s “co-worker” is even more difficult than being another human being’s “co-worker.” While there are definite uncertainties in having the sovereign God as a co-worker, there is also one certainty, indeed the most important certainty, and this is that God will remain faithful to his promise of causing the human being to persevere in his faith. The real difficulty then is to work with God and understand continually that “I am able to do nothing at all,” and it is most difficult to grasp this concept “when one seemingly is capable of doing everything.” All too often, we forget God and think that we are able to operate without him and his help. Therefore, what is necessary is “self-denial,” because “only in self-denial can one effectually praise love,” because “only in self-denial can one hold fast to God” who is both love and the very means by which one can do anything, including praising love. Whatever a human being knows about love apart from God is going to be extremely superficial. Instead, “he must come to know the deeper love from God” by becoming an instrument of God through “self-denial.” Just as every human being can come to know that God loves him, he can also come to know about love. It is also important to realize that the task of learning about love takes a lifetime and is the only path towards being able to praise love.

Kierkegaard continues, “Only in self-denial can one effectually praise love. No poet can do it”—unless of course the poet comes to know that he is loved by God; but if he does not, then the “poet can sing of erotic love and friendship” only. He cannot praise love effectually. He uses his God-given talent to praise love, but the love that he praises is only erotic love and friendship. It is not true love. If the poet is going to praise love in a biblical sense, then he must “relate [himself] to God in self-denial,” which will mean everything to him. He will be passionate about it, infinitely so, with “inwardness” and “earnestness.” In addition, his relationship to God will mean more than his poetry, no

matter how noble and renowned it becomes. “Who, then, should better be able to praise love than the person who truly loves God, since he indeed relates himself to his object in the only right way: he relates himself to God and truly loves.” And all this because he has turned inwardly in self-denial as he recognizes that “God is Love.”

Kierkegaard continues with the theme of inwardness. “This is *inwardly* the condition or the mode in which praising love must be done” (italics mine). In addition, the very act of praising love has as its purpose “to win people to it, to make them properly aware of what in a conciliatory spirit is granted to every human being” (if God so wills it), which goal is the highest that any human being can achieve. Nevertheless, it is still true that it does not depend upon the human being’s talent or abilities the way his being involved in “art and science” do. In addition, “[t]he one who praises art and science still sows dissension between the gifted and the ungifted” since these depend upon a person’s being talented enough to pursue them. “But the one who praises love reconciles all” people to one another, since it is equally possible for them to love and it is equally possible for them to praise love. Love is universal, while art and science are not. Love and praising love require only inwardness, which is possible for all human beings through God’s grace.

In the second statement that Kierkegaard makes in this chapter, he shifts from inwardness to outwardness. “*The work of praising love must be done outwardly in self-sacrificing unselfishness.*” He goes on to explain what he means by “*self-sacrificing unselfishness*” and how it is outward instead of inward. He has just described that “[t]hrough self-denial a human being gains the ability to be an instrument by inwardly making himself into nothing before God.” Now, he will go on to describe that “[t]hrough self-sacrificing unselfishness he outwardly makes himself into nothing, an unworthy servant. Inwardly, he does not become self-important, since he is nothing, and outwardly he does not become self-important either, since he is nothing, he is nothing before God—and he does not forget that right where he is he is before God.”

The problem is when a person becomes tempted to be impressed with his outward actions of love. He forgets his self-denial, that he always acts and performs his works of love “before God.” He is caught in an illusion. He imagines that it is only during certain moments that he is “before God,” like living in Denmark and appearing only occasionally before the king of Denmark. However, a person is always “before God.” Thus, “outward self-sacrificing unselfishness is required if love is truly to be praised, and to want to praise love in the love of truth is indeed a work of love” like all the other works of love that Kierkegaard has described in this book.

Again, as with all other human endeavors, the temptation is to “gain earthly advantages” through one’s actions, even to “win the approval of people” and have them applaud you for being so loving. “But truly this is not loving.” Instead, a person must pursue the opposite, to “make every sacrifice” for the sake of the love of truth, even the sacrifice of being known and applauded for one’s loving actions. A key to this perspective on love is to keep in mind that “[t]ruth must essentially be regarded as struggling in this world.” It has never been the case, and it never will be the case until the end of history that the majority of people in this world want truth, the truth of the Bible and of God. The result is that a person who proclaims love and does love as the Bible describes cannot win the complete approval of the majority of people. Truth, by definition, is offensive to us human beings. Therefore, the world may acknowledge and even applaud loving actions of self-sacrifice and unselfishness, but the world cannot and will not acknowledge the ultimate source of these actions—God. Kierkegaard also points out that even Jesus’ apostles never proclaimed the truth in order to gain people’s approval, but in order to win them to the truth. They never sought glory from people, but never to seek glory from people requires “self-denial” and “self-sacrifice.” The apostles’

ability to deny and sacrifice themselves was ultimately because they were “[r]ooted in the eternal.” What happened to them in this life did not matter to them—whether people approved of them or not. All that mattered to them was that they gained eternal life in the process of exercising their responsibility to proclaim the message of Jesus as the Messiah.

Kierkegaard continues by describing the spiritual climate of his own culture, that “everything is done to make everything momentary and the momentary everything!” He asks, “Is not everything being done to make the moment as preponderant as possible, superior to the eternal, to the truth?” This is like the Christianity in our day, where “the abundant life” is defined as “the victorious Christian life” or something close to it, and the emphasis is on what God can do for you now. The eternal gets lost in the need for present spiritual fulfillment and happiness. However, to lose the eternal in the present moment is to ignore God regardless of how often and how vigorously people speak about God as the one who makes the moment a moment of victory over sin or about how close they feel to God—because, as Kierkegaard says, people forget their “downfall,” their moral depravity and their inability to do anything at all unless God chooses otherwise. They think they can influence God by their “faith” and move him to work powerfully in their lives so that they escape the vicissitudes of this life and their own depravity. Thus, “[t]he quiet patience, the humble and obedient slowness, the noble renunciation of momentary influence [on God and other people], the distance of infinity from the moment, the love devoted to one’s God and to one’s idea, which are necessary to think one thought—this seems to be disappearing.” As so often happens down through history, “Man’ becomes ‘the measure of all things” (to quote Protagoras), even within Christianity in spite of how passionately people speak of God and Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

In Kierkegaard’s day, as in ours, the primary but wrong goal is to be admired by people, to be approved of by the world, one’s friends, and one’s colleagues, sometimes in the name of God—even while denying that this is the goal, in other words, even while trying to spiritualize the goal and claim that it is all for God. If it is all for God, then why are we constantly having to reassure people (and ourselves) that it is only for God? Would it not be better just to remain silent and not even risk the possibility that we are seeking the admiration and approval of people? Kierkegaard says that, in his day, humble silence is not happening, because everyone assumes that everyone is “wise” in the sense of agreeing that the leaders of both church and state are correct in their approach to Christianity and life. “While one person admires another and admires him because he is just like the rest [whether in society or in church], no one longs for the solitude in which one worships God.” Here, Kierkegaard is speaking of true solitude, not the cheap imitation that we are taught within Christianity where we are encouraged to be alone before God and then report on it to everyone so that we make sure that we are all doing it “correctly,” i.e., like all the rest. Thus, Kierkegaard says, “No one in longing for the standard of eternity rejects this cheap exemption from the highest!”

Unfortunately, this “is how important the moment has become,” so important that everyone must talk about it and encourage others towards it. However, “can the moment ever have the true conception of what love is? No, impossible,” because love must turn away from the moment. It must give up the moment. It must resign itself to “self-denial.” If a speaker hopes to find approval from people for his encouragement to them to love, he has forgotten that he does so “in a world that crucified the one who was Love” and “in a world that persecuted and exterminated so many of love’s witnesses,” e.g. certain apostles and other martyrs who died for their faith.

“Even if conditions in this regard have changed, even if things are no longer carried to the extreme and critical point that witnesses to the truth must sacrifice life and blood,

the world has nevertheless not become essentially better; it has only become less passionate and more petty.” This also means that the person whom the world identifies as worthy of being praised for his love towards others, God and eternity “will of course regard as [someone] censurable and culpable.” The world considers him loving enough. After all, look at what wonderful effects he is producing in the world through his loving actions. People are so much better off in their lives—physically, materially, emotionally, psychologically, and (we wholeheartedly believe) spiritually. However, if we measure a person’s love by its effects, then we have forgotten “the requirement” that eternity puts on us and committed “treason against the eternal.” Instead, we should press home “eternity’s requirement,” but then it would look as though we hate “everything that most people live for”—to join in helping humanity and acquiring everyone’s approval for doing so. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard asks, is it “loving to strengthen and help people in their beloved error,” i.e., “to deceive people” by letting them pursue what the world acclaims instead of what eternity requires? Is not love “to be willing personally to make every sacrifice in communicating the truth” and “to be unwilling to sacrifice the least bit of truth.”

Then, Kierkegaard encourages the reader to participate with him in a thought experiment, to imagine what kind of person can speak about love without falling into the trap of seeking other people’s approval for doing so. He cites, as an example, Socrates, who considered himself the ugliest person in Greece, and perhaps he was. For Kierkegaard, Socrates was “the simple wise man of ancient times.” What characterized Socrates was that he “knew how to speak most beautifully of the love that loves beauty and the beautiful.” Now “[o]ne would think that” Socrates’ being so ugly “would have deterred him from speaking about the love that loves the beautiful—after all, one does avoid speaking of rope in the house of a man who has been hanged, and even beautiful people avoid speaking about beauty in the presence of the strikingly ugly, to say nothing of the ugly person himself.” However, Socrates was different and chose to defy what everyone else around him would have thought appropriate. He talked about the beautiful and thus made himself twice as ugly as he was in the eyes of his listeners.

Perhaps, if he had only had “a beautiful nose,” which is what the Greeks were known for, “he would have been unwilling to speak a single word about loving the beautiful,” because it would have seemed vain for him to do so. People would have thought that he was speaking about himself and trying to gain some advantage, particularly the advantage of others’ praising him for having a beautiful nose, by speaking of “loving the beautiful.” However, since he was ugly, he could be confident that the only advantage he gained was that “he became uglier and uglier” in the eyes of people when he spoke so eloquently about “loving the beautiful.”

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard claims that “the love that loves the beautiful is not” true love. True love can be only “self-denial’s love.” In order for the speaker of true love to be “poetically perfect,” he must make himself into someone who actually does not love with “self-denial’s love.” He must genuinely come across as someone who does not love others the way he should love them. Otherwise, he will be tempted to gain some sort of worldly advantage by praising love as one who himself fulfills his duty to love his neighbor as himself. Instead, he must always be concerned that people will think that he is “speaking of himself” when he praises love. Therefore, he must become in the eyes of his listeners a “self-lover,” someone who in no way loves with true love. Then, and only then, “can he freely speak about self-denial’s love,” which is true, biblical love. In this way, he can be happy that he has made himself into the most unloving person, just as Socrates was the ugliest person. Thus, the speaker of “self-denial’s” true love goes through a difficult period of preparation before he speaks. “But the preparation would not consist in reading many books or in being honored and esteemed for his universally



recognized self-denial,” because, as we think about it, certainly it is not possible that “*everyone* recognize as self-denial” what is actually self-denial. In fact, true self-denial cannot be seen, because it is an inward quality that is unavailable for public scrutiny. Therefore, the speaker of “self-denial’s” true love must prepare himself to make others regard him as the most unloving person. “And this would still not be very easy to achieve,” because it would be like doing well on an examination in school and also getting the lowest grade. In addition, he could also come across in a self-deprecating way, precisely because he wants people to praise him for his humility, thus undermining his whole project. Thus, the task of avoiding people’s acclaim while praising love is not easy but necessary.

“So much for the speaker” who praises love. What about the content of his speech? Well, this “should be about the un-lovable object” in the midst of talking about loving those who are easy to love, just as Socrates spoke of “*loving the ugly*” in the midst of his talking about loving the beautiful. “He did not deny that to love is to love the beautiful, but he still spoke also about—indeed it was a kind of jest—loving the ugly. What then is meant by *the beautiful*?” Kierkegaard answers that it is the object of our natural inclinations, and he calls attention to our basic passions. We are naturally inclined to love the beautiful. As he says, “Surely there is no need to command that one shall love the beautiful. But the ugly!” Well, that is a completely separate question.

Getting back to the subject at hand, what is analogous to the “beautiful” in the case of true love? “It is the beloved and the friend.” Just as there is no need to command that someone love the “beautiful,” there is surely no need to command that a person love his beloved or his friend. “The beloved and the friend are the immediate and direct objects of immediate love, the choice of passion and inclination.” We all immediately and naturally feel like loving our beloved and our friend, because our passions naturally lead us there without any hesitancy. Then Kierkegaard asks, “And what is *the ugly* [in reference to love]? It is the *neighbor*, whom one **shall** love. One **shall** love him.” The neighbor is “ugly,” because we are not naturally inclined to love our neighbor. Therefore, God must command us to love him, and apparently Socrates “knew nothing at all about this. He did not know that the neighbor existed and that one should love him; when he spoke about loving the ugly, it was only teasing,” probably because he was referring to himself. However, Socrates did not know the biblical commandment, “You shall love your neighbor.” Otherwise, he probably would have spoken about loving the neighbor as analogous to loving the ugly. But would he have teased about it? Hopefully not. Loving one’s neighbor is the most serious of issues, because it involves God’s commandment to love in a biblical manner.

Kierkegaard is, therefore, directing our attention to the fact that the “neighbor is the un-lovable object.” He “is not anything” that our natural inclinations and passions find attractive. In fact, we naturally turn away from our neighbor, because to love him is a duty, not the result of a natural feeling. Consequently, one does not gain in a worldly sense anything by “speaking about having to love the un-lovable object. Yet, the true love is love for the neighbor, or it is not to find the lovable object but to find the un-lovable object lovable.” Our natural disposition is to seek the lovable object. However, the biblical commandment says that it is our duty to seek the un-lovable object and not only to see him, our neighbor, as lovable, but also to love him with “works of love,” which include praising love with self-denial and self-sacrificing unselfishness.

Kierkegaard now declares that when the speaker “makes himself into the most self-loving [unloving] of all, and the content of his discourse” is about “loving the un-lovable object” as opposed to loving the beloved or the friend, then he has made gaining any advantage in this world impossible. He has combined the two necessary ingredients for ensuring that the world does not applaud and approve of him—unselfishness and

seeking the unlovable to love. He sounds to others as though he himself is the most unloving person who ever lived, and he proclaims a message of loving those who are the most difficult to love. The combination of these two offensive ideas make him quite unappealing to the world. In other words, his message will not sell like the poet's, because the world applauds only those who agree with them, that the highest love is loving the beloved and the friend—and without God in the equation. The world, in the final analysis, cannot love the unselfish speaker of true love. In turn, the content of his message “is not calculated to curry favor with people, who prefer hearing about what inclination and passion so easily and gladly understand and would rather not hear what does not at all please inclination and passion.”

Finally, Kierkegaard addresses the situation he sees within the Danish state church of his day and likens it to what has been the case throughout church history. He says that this journey into the poetical mindset to compare and contrast true love with that of the poet will “serve to shed light on a fraud or a misunderstanding that has appeared repeatedly in all Christendom.” Back in Chapter IIC of the First Series, “*You Shall Love Your Neighbor*,” Kierkegaard defined Christendom as the institution of Christianity that throughout church history has claimed to help people be rightly related to God by either knowingly or unknowingly denying the Christianity of the New Testament while also preaching the New Testament. Such denial of New Testament Christianity is not because Christendom's doctrinal statements have contained heresy per se, but because it has emphasized the correctness of doctrine and the outward practice of the spiritual aspects of what it believed Christianity required instead of authentic inwardness. Thus, regarding love, a “person makes Christian humility and self-denial empty when he indeed denies himself in one respect but does not have the courage to do it decisively, and therefore he takes care to be understood in his humility and self-denial; and then he becomes honored and esteemed for his humility and self-denial—which certainly is not self-denial.”

Such lack of self-denial is similar to a pastor who encourages his congregation to practice the spiritual discipline of prayer, which is a form of self-denial since it is taking time away from their being able to engage in business and make money. But then the pastor casually remarks that he so enjoys his hour-long sessions of prayer before God. My how the congregation honor and esteem him, including those who are struggling so hard in their work where they are paid by the hour in their jobs to put food on the table and a roof over their family's heads and quite frankly cannot spare an hour to pray or there will be less food on the table and some bills may not get paid. In fact, is it not cruel of the pastor to brag about the freedom he has in his job to set aside an hour to pray while his congregation come home exhausted from their work and are barely getting enough sleep to go back the next morning and do it all over again? Thus, he turns his self-denial into the very opposite by getting his congregation to honor and esteem him for his supposed self-denial.

Kierkegaard ends this chapter, “Therefore, in order to be able to praise love, self-denial is required *inwardly* and self-sacrificing unselfishness *outwardly*.” We must remain inwardly committed to the fact that we can do nothing apart from God's help and grace. And we must outwardly pursue loving the unlovable. “If, then, someone undertakes to praise love and is asked whether it is actually out of love on his part that he does it, the answer must be: ‘No one else can decide this for certain; it is possible that it is vanity, pride—in short, something bad, but it is also possible that it is love.’” One definitely gets the impression from Kierkegaard that it may be better not to speak at all about truth and love because of the temptation to do so from a place of pride and the need to obtain people's approval. Yet, God commands us to speak about truth and love, even while pointing out that we are all fundamentally hostile towards biblical truth in our moral

depravity. Thus, whenever we speak and praise love, we should pursue “self-denial” inwardly and “self-sacrificing unselfishness” outwardly so that we are willing to become silent if, at any moment, it would be the better way to communicate true love in order to avoid bragging and soliciting people’s applause and approval.

## CONCLUSION

Kierkegaard begins his conclusion, “In this book we have endeavored ‘many times and in many ways’<sup>2</sup> to praise love. As we thank God that we have succeeded in completing the book in the way we wished, we shall now conclude by introducing the Apostle John, who says, ‘Beloved, let us love one another.’”<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard goes on to comment that John neither directly commands his readers with a “You *shall* love,” nor does he soft pedal the issue with strictly poetic language. Instead, in Kierkegaard’s opinion, the apostle is basically wondering how it is that anyone could fail to recognize that loving his neighbor is the essence of true religion, of authentic Christianity. In other words, a profession of faith in Jesus as the Christ is insufficient, because it is vacuous if it is not backed up with works of true love. Self-love and an authentic profession of faith are mutually exclusive.

“From a Christian point of view, love is commanded; but the love commandment is the old commandment that always remains new.”<sup>4</sup> The love commandment is not like a human commandment, which becomes old and dulled over the years or is changed by the mutual agreement of those who should obey it.” Instead, the biblical commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is a timeless commandment. Thus, a person should become more intimately acquainted with the commandment and its pursuit. It is an opportunity to do this that Kierkegaard hopes he has provided in this book.

Then, he says, “Just one more thing, remember *the Christian like for like, eternity’s like for like.*” Kierkegaard considers this eternal like for like to be such an important truth that he admits that he must end at least one of his books with a discussion of it. Therefore, now, he does—an addendum or postscript to his “conclusion.” He goes on to say that Christianity in his day “is not infrequently presented in a certain sentimental, almost soft, form of love.” Thus, there is not the “rigorousness” that “must be heard”—so that, without this rigorousness, “God’s love easily becomes a fabulous and childish conception” where Christ is transformed into someone so “mild and sickly-sweet” that he is no longer “an offense to the Jews” and “foolishness to the [gentiles]” (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23).

Kierkegaard claims that Christianity’s purpose is to abolish the “Jewish like for like,” which is found in the Mosaic Covenant. In addition, it has replaced the Jewish like for like with its own, that is, “eternity’s like for like.”<sup>5</sup> Exodus 21:24 speaks of an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” which God commanded the nation of Israel to apply in their relationships with one another. However, this commandment could be easily interpreted as merely an “external” like for like.<sup>6</sup> Instead, “Christianity turns our attention completely away from the external, turns it inward, and makes every one of your relationships to other people into a God-relationship.” Therefore, in the Christian sense, “a person

<sup>2</sup> cf. Hebrews 1:1, “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,”

<sup>3</sup> cf. 1 John 4:7, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

<sup>4</sup> cf. 1 John 2:7,8, “Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining.”

<sup>5</sup> I do not agree with Kierkegaard’s perspective on the Mosaic Covenant, that Christianity has “abolished” it. But his point about “eternity’s like for like” is still valid.

<sup>6</sup> This is really the issue that both Jews and Christians, indeed all human beings, are guilty of, i.e., failing to appreciate the profundity of our inner moral problem that the Bible addresses. The result is that we make the biblical message more about external religious (and even moral) pursuits instead of dealing with our fundamental inward problem.

ultimately and essentially has only God to deal with in everything,” although each person lives and acts in the present world and must deal with each earthly circumstance and relationship that confronts him.

Having only God essentially to deal with also means that a person can feel the greatest comfort even when his relationships with other human beings fail, because God is infinitely compassionate and forgiving. It also means that a person must feel the greatest “strenuousness” and “rigorousness” in even his relationships with other human beings, because God is ultimately infinitely demanding, which is the double edged sword of the biblical message. God is definitely longsuffering and merciful, but he is also harsh and demanding.<sup>7</sup> God does not want us to take only a half interest in his truth, message, and commandments. Yes, he is forgiving of our disobedience of his truth and commandments. However, he is also infinitely and eternally serious about our pursuit of obedience to them. There is both a quiet relief and rigorousness that we must take in our approach to his truth—relief because we operate in the realm of God’s grace and mercy, and rigorousness because God commands us to obey him.

Kierkegaard likens God to a master educator who makes the student turn his eyes upon him via his own conscience. It is this, our internal moral compass, that constantly reminds us that we are living out our existences as human beings before a moral God of justice. Therefore, every time we feel guilt, we have the opportunity to experience both the forgiveness and the rigorousness of God—the former because of his compassion and mercy, the latter because of his infinite interest in morality. “Thus God is the educator; his love is the greatest leniency and the greatest rigorousness.” Therefore, God’s leniency also becomes the utmost rigorousness to the person who is not willing to accept his leniency; and this is the catch. We dare not take God’s mercy lightly, because then we will experience his justice. In other words, God is lenient towards those who are humble and appeal to him for his forgiveness, but he is rigorous towards the proud who refuse to recognize their deep need for his unmerited mercy .

This rigorousness exists just as much in the New Testament message as in the Old Testament message and applies to the truly humble. Kierkegaard cites the example of Jesus’ words to the Roman “centurion from Capernaum” who implored him to heal his servant and who also said that he was unworthy of Jesus’ coming into his home. The centurion knew that Jesus could heal the servant just by saying the word right where he stood as he was entering Capernaum. Thus, Jesus responds to him, “Be it done for you as you have believed.” Kierkegaard goes on to comment that, on the one hand, these are words from Jesus of great mercy, leniency, and joy for the centurion, because Jesus is fulfilling his request. However, these words also indicate a profound rigorousness, especially as we think of them in regard to our own eternal salvation. What if Jesus says to us, “Be it done for you as you have believed”? There are two questions that arise for us, how have we believed, and is our belief genuine, biblical belief? Actually, these questions are one and the same. Do we really know that we have genuine faith that God would do for us as we have believed and grant us eternal life? Kierkegaard claims that Christian preachers cannot declare to *you* that *you* have faith. How do they know your heart? They do not. Christian preachers can only exhort you to have genuine belief; but your belief is an inward act, and no else but God can know what you are truly doing inwardly. Can you even know that you have authentic belief in the midst of Christianity’s saying to you, “Be it done for you as you believe.’ How rigorous!”

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<sup>7</sup> A quick look at the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah through Malachi, and parables of Jesus such as the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector (Luke 18:9-17) and The Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) reveals these dual aspects of God’s character.

Next, Kierkegaard provides an example of the rigorousness of Christianity from the Danish state church of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. This example should sound familiar to us. Kierkegaard writes, “Let us suppose that someone said to Christianity, ‘It is absolutely certain that I have been baptized [or gone forward at an evangelistic meeting, or confessed publicly in a Christian church my faith in Christ, or believed all the doctrines that the church said I must believe in order to have eternal life]; does this mean that it is indeed also absolutely certain that I have faith?’” The proper response of Christianity is, “Be it done for you as you believe.” But what about the centurion? The catch is that although “not baptized, the centurion believed” and “it was done for him as he believed.” Would not Jesus have said the same thing if we raised the question regarding his not having gone forward at an evangelistic meeting, or his not having publicly confessed in a church his faith in Christ, or his not having believed all the doctrines that the church has said that he must believe in order to have eternal life?

Perhaps Jesus is saying to the centurion only that he will heal his servant because of his faith in Jesus’ ability to do so. However, certainly this does not also mean that the centurion will obtain eternal life. In order to gain eternal life, he must go forward at an evangelistic meeting, be baptized, confess publicly his faith in a church, and believe all the doctrines that the church says that he must believe. Alas, the centurion’s slave is healed, but the centurion still stands outside eternal salvation—in spite of the fact that he has faith. Is this what Jesus is saying to him even though he adds that he has not yet “found such great faith with anyone in Israel”—that it is a Roman centurion, a gentile, who has greater faith than any Jew whom he has met?

Kierkegaard asks, would the gospel be the gospel if this is all that Jesus means by his words to the centurion, “Be it done for you as you believe?” And does the principle implied by Jesus words, “**as** you believe,” apply only to healing servants? Indeed it extends beyond earthly healing, all the way into eternity—this is what Kierkegaard is saying. Nevertheless, these words, “**as** you believe,” exercise “a powerful restraining influence.”

Then, Kierkegaard states the premise of this whole chapter, indeed of this whole book, “On this text [“as you believe”] one can preach rigorousness just as well as leniency, because this text also has rigorousness, the Christian rigorousness that certainly has not hesitated to exclude the timorous from the kingdom of God, or, perhaps more accurately, has not hesitated to teach that the timorous exclude themselves, so that a person can no more bully his way into God’s kingdom than he can cowardly and spinelessly whimper his way in.” Thus, Kierkegaard capsulizes his biblical theology, that God is both compassionate and demanding and that man is both morally depraved and required to be courageously humble in the face of God’s ability to exercise eternally his mercy and forgiveness. However, as in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Danish state church, even while diligently studying and preaching the Bible, people try to “bully [their] way into God’s kingdom” by finding security in their going forward at evangelistic meetings, being baptized, confessing publicly in a church their faith in Christ, and believing all the right doctrines that the church historically has said they must believe in order to obtain eternal salvation. The irony is, as Kierkegaard says, that baptism, etc. are a kind of security—but only “if you actually believe that ‘Be it done for you as you believe’ is the security.”

Kierkegaard goes on to explain how all this is true. First, by making baptism (or any of the other things I mentioned) into one’s security, a person has either knowingly or unknowingly turned Christianity into a matter of earning God’s gift of eternal life and salvation by turning Christianity’s inwardness into outwardness. “But God is not mocked, nor does he let himself be made a fool. He is too sublimely transcendent ever to think that to him a human being’s effort should have some meritoriousness.” God, as the author of all reality and who grants his forgiveness towards human beings strictly on the

basis of his grace, would never think of allowing a human being to earn what he does not deserve, his forgiveness. God's grace, by definition, cannot be earned.

Then, Kierkegaard exposes his Lutheran roots, "Yet [God] requires it [i.e., meritoriousness], and then one thing more, that the human being himself not dare to think that he has some meritoriousness" within himself, which is Luther's famous distinction between Law and the Gospel. He held that the Law, found in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, required a person to make himself worthy of God's compassion and forgiveness, while the Gospel, found in the Greek scriptures of the New Testament, came to the rescue of the human being who discovered his inability to fulfill the meritorious nature of the Law. The Gospel granted him forgiveness strictly on the basis of grace, which cannot be earned.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as Kierkegaard points out, to face into one's inability to please God through the Law and humble oneself before him and his grace takes great courage. Kierkegaard calls the person who is unwilling to thus humble himself "a cowardly and slack human being" and goes on to comment that such a person puts his faith in his external actions as a means to make himself worthy before God instead of relying on his inwardness. "But God is also too sublimely transcendent to play the childish game of the good God with a cowardly and slack human being. It is eternally certain that it will be done for you as you believe; but the certitude of faith, or the certitude that you, yes, you have faith, you must every moment gain with God's help, that is, not in any external manner."

The distinction that Kierkegaard is making here is very subtle. God's help for a human being is not first and foremost to get baptized, or to go forward at an evangelistic meeting, or to publicly confess in church Jesus as the Christ, or to believe the right doctrines espoused by the church. These are all external works, and a person can do these things even in the midst of abject rebellion against God, because he can do them to please others and gain their approval, or even to please himself. Neither does God's help occur because a person performs these religious actions, or any religious actions for that matter. Instead, God's help is first and foremost internal. It is the help of causing a person to humble himself courageously before a morally perfect and transcendently capable God even if one is never baptized, never goes forward at an evangelistic meeting, never confesses publicly in a church that Jesus is the Christ, and never believes all the right doctrines that the historical church has required a person to believe in order to obtain eternal life and salvation.

And this is in spite of Jesus' own words, "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32,33; NAS95). Whenever Jesus speaks thus of external actions, he presumes the rigorousness of inwardness as what is necessary first and foremost. Therefore, Kierkegaard goes on to say, "You must have God's help to believe that you are saved by Baptism; you must have God's help to believe that in the Lord's Supper you receive the gracious forgiveness of your sins." While it is true that baptism and the Lord's Supper are religious rituals that the Bible supposedly commands Christians to perform, nevertheless it is not the doing of these in an external manner that is what determines whether or not a person has eternal salvation.<sup>9</sup> In the same way, it is not going forward at an evangelistic meeting, or publicly confessing in a church Jesus as Lord and Savior,

<sup>8</sup> See for example Francis Pieper's explanation in his *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 1953), Volume III, pages 220-252. Pieper writes, "The term 'Law' is used in its proper...sense in Scripture when it refers to what does not bear on faith, but demands perfect observance on the part of man... The term 'Gospel' is used in its proper sense in Holy Writ when it refers to what does not call for works, but for faith...[and] assures [believers] of grace..." (pg. 222).

<sup>9</sup> I say "supposedly" because I would argue that the Bible does not command all Christians to perform them.

or believing the right doctrines that the church has historically declared necessary to believe that saves a person either. It is fundamentally “God’s help” inwardly, in the secret place of a person’s heart, that determines that authenticity of a person’s Christianity and the certainty of his destiny of eternal life.

For this reason, Kierkegaard says that “the pastor [or priest, or rabbi, or any religious leader] does not have the right to say that you have faith.” After all, can the pastor or religious leader truly see into your heart, the most secret place of your being, which God alone can see? Of course not. Then what is the pastor doing by saying that you have faith? He is usurping God’s position and acting either out of sheer immature naiveté or out of arrogance and fear—out of arrogance because he believes he has the right and ability to speak on behalf of God, and out of fear because he is in despair with respect to his own eternal salvation. Thus, he desperately needs the approval of people who themselves are cowardly and need to follow someone who tells them, “Yes, you have faith,” because they are unwilling to be helped inwardly only by God. Therefore, Kierkegaard can say that while the Gospel is lenient, because no one can deserve God’s grace and help, nevertheless it is rigorous, because it still requires tremendous courage and profound humility. “[T]he Gospel will not save you by rigorousness but by leniency; but this leniency will save you, it will not deceive you; therefore there is rigorousness in it.”

Now Kierkegaard begins to drive his point home with the first of three italicized statements, “*If this like for like holds true even in relation to what most definitely must be called Gospel, how much more, then, when Christianity itself proclaims the Law.*” Once again, we see that Kierkegaard is using Lutheran terms. The Gospel according to Luther is a message of grace where the only commandment is to believe. The Law is a message of works where all the commandments of the Old Testament require moral perfection and should cause a person to face into his moral depravity and inability to fulfill the Law. But now, Kierkegaard asks, what if the Gospel issues another commandment besides believe? In fact, what if it says, “*Forgive, then you will also be forgiven*” (cf. Matthew 6:14,15 – “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” (NAS95)).

Kierkegaard imagines that someone could interpret these words of Jesus in such a way that the person thinks he can receive forgiveness even if he does not forgive others. I suppose that Kierkegaard means that the process would look like this—I ask God for forgiveness, then God forgives me, then I forgive others, and finally God forgives me some more. Notice, however, that the first two steps are achieved without the last two so that God’s forgiveness is still available if I do not obey this command to forgive. Yet, Kierkegaard says, “Truly this is a misinterpretation. Christianity’s view is: forgiveness is forgiveness; your forgiveness is your forgiveness; your forgiveness of another is your own forgiveness; the forgiveness you give is the forgiveness you receive, not the reverse, that the forgiveness you receive is the forgiveness you give.”

This sounds as though Kierkegaard is contradicting himself. Did he not say that I cannot merit any good thing from God? And does not this last statement of his sound as though I can get God to forgive me if I forgive others, a *quid pro quo* like for like, as though I am earning his forgiveness? Yes, it does sound like this, but it is not what Kierkegaard means. He means that, in the light of the help God gives a person through his grace, this same person will recognize that it does not make any sense for God to forgive him if he does not forgive others. Therefore, it also stands to reason that, to the extent a person is willing to forgive others and pursues this by God’s grace, to the same extent God forgives him, because God’s grace works like this in only people who are forgiven.



Kierkegaard goes on to explain this last point, “It is as if Christianity would say: Pray to God humbly and trustingly about your forgiveness, because he is indeed merciful in a way no human being is.” In addition, if you want to know how this whole business of forgiveness works, then watch yourself as you confront opportunities to forgive those who have done wrong towards you. “If honestly before God you wholeheartedly forgive your enemy..., then you may also dare to hope for your forgiveness [by God], because they are one and the same. God forgives you neither more nor less nor otherwise than **as** you forgive those who have sinned against you,” which is the like for like, the rigorousness, of Christianity. “It is only an illusion to imagine that one oneself has forgiveness although one is reluctant to forgive others.” No, forgiveness is forgiveness. God’s forgiveness of me must be my forgiveness of others, which is the first part of the commandment as stated above, “*Forgive.*” However, my forgiveness of others is God’s forgiveness of me, which is the second part of the commandment, “*Then you will also be forgiven.*” Kierkegaard thus asks, “how could a person truly believe in forgiveness if his own life is an objection against the existence of forgiveness!?” Every relationship with a human being is also a relationship with God, the creator. Thus, there exists a Christian like for like, even in the environment of grace where one earns nothing from God.

Kierkegaard moves on to his second italicized statement, “*Therefore to accuse another person before God is to accuse oneself, like for like.*” Is Kierkegaard saying that I must remain silent before God while others treat me wrongly? No. He is simply saying that I must “take care lest [I] be carried away in accusing the guilty one before God,” i.e., take care that I not demand that God punish this person eternally while forgetting that this is exactly what I deserve from God. I cannot deserve God’s grace and mercy, but I do deserve his eternal punishment. This latter truth is what militates against my self-righteously accusing others before God and demanding that God treat them harshly after they have wronged me.

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard takes the discussion in even another direction. “Ah, we are so willing to deceive ourselves, we are so willing to deceive ourselves into thinking that a person for his part should have a private relation with God,” as though I could go to God privately, as though I were an innocent party and only a victim of someone else’s crime. Instead, my relationship with God is like my relationship with the government. It is impossible for me to go to the government, tell them about someone’s stealing from me, and expect them to keep this matter just between them and me. No, the government must make the crime public by arresting the criminal, prosecuting him, and punishing him. Kierkegaard likens this to my relationship with God by saying that if I were to try to accuse someone privately before God, that God would have to declare publicly that I too am a guilty party, deserving of his condemnation just like the one who has harmed me. In other words, if you judge others before God, “he judges you also. But if you do not engage in accusing someone before God or in making God into a judge, then God is the gracious God” towards you.

Kierkegaard illustrates the public nature of justice with a story that was similar to an actual event in his contemporary Copenhagen. “There was once a criminal who had stolen some money, including a hundred-rix-dollar bill. He wanted to change this bill and turned to another criminal at the latter’s house. The second criminal took the bill, went into the next room as if to change it, came out again, acted as if nothing had happened, and greeted the waiting visitor as if they were seeing each other for the first time—in short, he defrauded him out of the hundred-rix-dollar bill. The first criminal became so furious over this that in his resentment he notified the authorities of the matter, how shamefully he had been defrauded. The second criminal was of course imprisoned and charged with fraud—but alas, the first question the authorities raised in this case was: How did the plaintiff get the money? Thus there were two cases. The first criminal

understood quite correctly that he was in the right in the case of fraud; now he wanted to be the honest man, the good citizen who appeals to the authorities to obtain his rights. Ah, but the authorities do not function privately or take up any isolated matter it pleases someone to lay before them, nor do they always give the case the turn the plaintiff and the informer give it—the authorities look more deeply into the circumstances. It is also with the relation with God. If you accuse another person before God, two actions are instituted immediately; precisely when you come and inform on the other person, God begins to think about how you are involved.” We cannot play the innocent victim before God, because we are indeed not innocent before him.

Next, Kierkegaard explains his third and final italicized statement, “*Like for like; indeed, Christianity is so rigorous that it even asserts a heightened inequality.*” Such inequality should surprise us, because Kierkegaard has spoken about all human beings as equals since everyone is my neighbor. What, therefore, is this “*inequality*” that he speaks of here? He refers to Jesus’ statement in the Sermon on the Mount, “Why do you see the splinter in your brother’s eye but do not see the log that is in your own” (cf. Matthew 7:3). Then he mentions that Abraham a St. Clara has interpreted this statement as follows: “The log in your own eye is neither more nor less than seeing *and condemning* the splinter in your brother’s eye (italics mine).” Certainly, we are all abundantly capable of recognizing others’ faults and wrongdoings, i.e., the splinters in their eyes, but how we relate to them and their faults before God is of the greatest importance. If we see a splinter and admit that we have an equal splinter in our own eye, then we are relating correctly. However, if we see a splinter and deny that we have an equal splinter, then we actually have a log in our own eye, because we have seen the other person’s splinter “judgingly.” This is what Kierkegaard means by the rigorosity of Christianity. The like for like of Christianity “*asserts a heightened inequality*” if we view other people’s faults in a judgmental manner. We try to make ourselves out to be less evil than others, but we are equally evil. If we do not admit this, then we are no longer equally evil. We are more evil.

Thus, the real problem is that “even if [we] do not see the log [in our own eye], and even if no human being sees it, God sees it.” Therefore, a splinter in another person’s eye becomes a log in one’s own eye when the former is seen in a condemning way. Thus, “to see the splinter in your brother’s eye in the presence of God” such that you demand that God dispense his justice towards your brother “is high treason” towards God. If only you could make God absent and judge your brother in complete freedom and with impunity. However, “God is always present; and if he is always present, he is also looking at you. At the moment when you really think God is present, it surely would not occur to you to see [judgingly] any splinter in your brother’s eye or occur to you to apply this dreadfully rigorous criterion—you who are guilty yourself.” This is like the criminal mentioned above who would “want to play the righteous man” by pursuing “his rights legally and judicially—but God regards it as presumptuousness for a human being to pretend purity and to judge the splinter in his brother’s eye.”

“How rigorous this Christian like for like is! The Jewish [i.e., that which understands that I am permitted to treat people only with justice and not with mercy], the worldly, the bustling like for like is: as others do unto you, by all means take care that you also do likewise unto them. But the Christian like for like is: God will do unto you exactly as you do unto others. In the Christian sense, you have nothing at all to do with what others do unto you—it does not concern you” eternally. It is a mere curiosity what others do unto you, but it is “a lack of good sense on your part to meddle in things that are absolutely no more your concern than if you were not present.” This sounds very stark and almost unrealistic, but again Kierkegaard is talking about the ideal. “You have to do only with what you do unto others, or how you take what others do unto you.” Each of us should

be concerned both with whether or not we are loving our neighbor and with whether or not we are seeing others' faults in a nonjudgmental way. If these two things remain our only concern in our relationships with others, then the "direction is inward; essentially you have to do only with yourself before God."

This, as we have seen, is Kierkegaard's trademark—the concept of inwardness. As he goes on to say, "The Christian like for like belongs to this world of inwardness. It turns itself away and will turn you away from externality." The latter is where a person is concerned mostly with what is going on outside him. The former is where he is concerned mostly with what is going on inside him—particularly with how he is relating to God, either with humility, because he knows he needs God's unmerited mercy, or with pride, because he thinks he can perform well enough for God to earn his approval and forgiveness.

Therefore, "[i]n the Christian sense, to love people is to love God, and to love God is to love people" so that "what you do unto people, you do unto God, and therefore what you do unto people, God does unto you." As Kierkegaard goes on to say, "If you are indignant with people who do you wrong, then you are indignant with God, since ultimately it is still God who permits wrong to be done to you. But if you gratefully accept the wrong from God's hand 'as a good and perfect gift',<sup>10</sup> then you are not indignant with people either. If you refuse to forgive, then you actually want something else: you want to make God hard-hearted so that he, too, would not forgive." Then Kierkegaard asks, "how...could this hard-hearted God forgive you?" In other words, "If you cannot bear people's faults against you, how then should God be able to bear your sins against him?" This is why Kierkegaard can say, "No, like for like... If there is anger in you, then God is anger in you" (and angry with you); "if there is leniency and mercifulness in you, then God is mercifulness in you" (and merciful towards you). Thus, "God's relation to a human being is at every moment to infinitize what is in that human being at every moment." If there is in you a demand for justice against those who have harmed you, then God infinitely and eternally demands justice against you for having harmed and wronged him. If there is in you mercy and forgiveness towards those who have harmed you, then God infinitely and eternally grants you mercy and forgiveness.

Kierkegaard compares God to the Greek nymph Echo, who rendered exactly whatever sound she heard. Therefore, "[i]f there is a word you would rather not hear said to you, then watch your saying it; watch lest it slip out of you in solitude, because echo promptly repeats it and says it to *you*." In other words, "God just repeats everything to you that you say and do to other people," and "he repeats it with the magnification of infinity" and eternity. "God repeats the words of grace or of judgment that you say about another; he says the same thing word for word about you; and these same words are for you grace and judgment." Thus, it is important to listen beyond the noise of life that surrounds us, especially in a busy city and our world where information and voices bombard us constantly via the internet and other media. Instead, we must listen for eternity's repetition of what we say and do. Is God repeating towards us our words of grace intended for others or our words of judgment and condemnation?

Such is the Christian "like for like" but without any thought that "a person deserves grace." In fact, "the first thing you learn when you relate yourself to God in everything is that you have no merit whatever... If you want to have merit and to have deserved something, punishment is the only thing." Then Kierkegaard demonstrates his theory of atonement, i.e., his understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross as the Messiah. He says, "if you are unwilling in faith to appropriate to yourself another's merit [and he means Jesus' merit], then you will receive according to what you deserve." It

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<sup>10</sup> cf. James 1:17

would seem that with these words Kierkegaard is expressing the standard Lutheran doctrine of the atonement of Christ, that Jesus merited our eternal salvation by meeting the demands of the Law and providing a perfect sacrifice to God for our sins.<sup>11</sup> When a person recognizes the value of Christ's death and then appropriates by faith his death for himself in order not to receive what he actually deserves, God's eternal condemnation, then he is exercising true faith.

Finally, Kierkegaard compares the Christian "like for like" to a child who is "well-disciplined" and "has an unforgettable impression of rigorousness." Thus, the Christian "relates himself to God's love" with "an unforgettable fear and trembling, even though he rests in God's love. Such a person will surely also avoid speaking to God about the wrongs of others against him, of the splinter in his brother's eye, because such a person will prefer to speak to God only about grace, lest this fateful word 'justice' lose everything for him through what he himself evoked, the rigorous like for like."

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<sup>11</sup> cf. Francis Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 1950), Volume II, pages 344-382, especially pg. 381, "Lutherans say that the blood of Christ, the blood of the Son of God, has infinite value in even its smallest amount — not the quantity, but the quality of the blood shed by the Son of God endows it with infinite redemptive worth..."