By This Shall All Men Know That Ye Are My Disciples

If Ye Have Love One To Another

By Harold M. Freligh

Among the perils of the last days none is more subtle than the one Jesus predicted in Matthew 24:12: "And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold."

Christ's first concern is not regarding our doctrine but our love. Doctrine is the channel but not the living water that flows therein. A dry channel helps no one. Peter's doctrine was correct. He openly acknowledged, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Yet he later denied Jesus because his love for Him did not surmount his love for himself.

Lovest Thou Me?

When the Lord later commissioned him, He did not ask Peter whether his doctrine was straight. Thrice He queried, "Lovest thou Me?" The Master was not concerned about Peter's doctrine, but his love. He knew if He had that, He had everything.

Neither is our zeal the most vulnerable target of attack. The Ephesian church had all the zeal that Christ could desire: "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience...And hast borne, and hast patience, and for My Name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted" (Rev. 2:2,3). Yet this is the church that had lost her first love. One can be so zealous as to give his body to be burned, and find that without love it profits him nothing (1 Corinthians 13:3).

Even our knowledge is not the chief concern of Christ. To "grow in grace, and in knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18) is one thing. But to grow in knowledge alone is another. Knowledge increases one's responsibility (James 3:1), but not his security unless it is harnessed to his will and directed by love.

Christ's blessing comes not in knowing, but in doing: "If ye know these things, happy (blessed) are ye if ye do them" (John 13:17). One may have knowledge, but without love he amounts to zero according to heaven's calculation: "And though I have...all knowledge...and have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2).

Love One Another

Love is the badge of discipleship: "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). Love cannot be counterfeited. That is why it is a safe test.

Love is the irrefutable evidence that convinces the world. It has more weight than tons of debate. It was not Stephen's defense before the Jewish council but his death that convinced the

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young man named Saul. Not Stephen's message but his unquestionable love for his Master brought conviction to this proud Pharisee. It burned into his conscience like a hot poker. Years later he referred to it (Acts 22:20). Stephen's victorious death, not his oratory, drove Saul of Tarsus into the arms of his Saviour.

Love puts joy in the heart and a song on the lips. Ribaldry and riot are replaced by "psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs." Criticism and complaining are evacuated because thanksgiving "always for all things" has moved in (Eph. 5:16-20). Love knows Him "Who giveth songs in the night" (Job 35:10). Paul and Silas with backs bleeding and feet in the stocks raised a symphony of praise that shook the prison to its foundations and the jailer to the depths of his soul. Their hearts were full of love instead of grumbling.

Keep the Fire of God's Love Burning on the Altar of Our Souls

Since love holds this high priority, it is no wonder the enemy seeks to cool it. The expression "wax cold" literally means to make something cold by blowing upon it. The abounding iniquity of the last days brings a Satanic chill, spawned in the dry ice of indifference, and blown over the King's banquet table till the whole is unpalatable.

The form is still there, but the warmth has gone. How can the King receive from our hands an offering that, even though it still has the correct appearance, is nothing but insipid bulk? Such offerings, like a soggy stack of pancakes, are fit only to be spewed out.

Coldness is perilous because it affects our relation to others, to our work, and to our Lord. When love has waxed cold, our relation to others is evidenced by our criticism of them. The servant who says, "My Lord delayeth His coming" is not disappointed because of it, for he has grown cold. Consequently he begins to "smite his fellowservants" (Matthew 24:48,49). And it must not be forgotten that some of the deadliest smiting is done with the tongue!

What a travesty on the grace of God and the testimony of His people, to find a congregation so torn apart as to leave nothing but splinters of a one-time fruitful branch!

"But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Galatians 5:15). Obviously in such a group--neither love to God nor to one's neighbor has prevailed, for "love suffereth long, and is kind" (1 Corinthians 13:4).

Love to the Death!

When our love has waxed cold, our work for the Lord sags. Love is the essential of service! A mild proclamation of Christian platitudes will never arrest the multitudes traveling the broad way. But one example of love-to-the-death will halt them to consider.

Love-service is liquid heat! It performs ministries that will not be done from any other motive--such ministries as going the second mile and giving our cloak as well as our coat (Matt. 5:40,41). Because the Ephesian church had left their first love, they had also left their first works (Rev. 2:5). A return to the first love means a return to the first works also.

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Ardent Love to Christ and to Each Other

Without love's constraining power, our motivation is gone (2 Corinthians 5:14). Working merely from a sense of duty will carry us scarcely beyond our own personal interests, to say nothing of the over-ripe harvest fields that await the sickle of the reaper. When ardor is gone, the chariot drags without wheels, or altogether stops. From here, it is but a step to eating and drinking with the drunken. "The Lord of that servant shall come...in an hour that he is not aware of" (Matthew 24:49-50).

When our love has waxed cold, our relation to the Lord is affected. In fact, it is our relation to Him that governs all the other relationships. Love will keep us at our post, disregarding ourselves and living only to please our Lord. "Blessed is that servant, whom his Lord when He cometh shall find so doing" (Matthew 24:45-46).

The subtlety of this danger lies in its gradual encroachment. It does not bounce upon us in full force. If that were so, we could be the better prepared to meet and resist it. But it comes like a creeping paralysis. Little by little the deadening process proceeds until we find our spiritual reflexes no more respond.

The danger is real; otherwise Jesus would not have predicted it. According to His warning, many will succumb to its fatal asphyxiation. It becomes easy to absorb the poisoned atmosphere of abounding iniquity. It takes conscious effort to resist it. This is no time for supine acceptance of the trend of the times--but for stalwart resistance thereto!

In view of the peril, wherein lies the cure? Let us not take our sound doctrine, our zeal, or our knowledge as guarantees of safety. It is possible to be as straight in our doctrine as a gun barrel--and as empty. Without ammunition, a rifle is nothing but an ornament. Unless our doctrinal gun, sparked by the flame of love, is bringing down the strongholds of the enemy, it is not functioning as it should.

Persecuting the Lord Jesus!

And as for zeal, it can be misdirected. Saul of Tarsus was zealously pursuing the church in his religious frenzy. But one day he awoke to the astounding revelation that he was persecuting the Lord Jesus! Zeal will start us going, but love will keep us going in the right direction. What a shock to realize that our zeal has driven us and our cargo into an engulfing marsh instead of a safe harbor! (Acts 9:4-5).

Nor is knowledge an insurance against coldness. Knowledge puffs us up, but love builds us up (1 Corinthians 8:1). There is a deal of difference between the two. The former is deflated by a single pin prick, but the latter is a solid edifice that will stand the strain of both these last days and the eternal day of reckoning. Demas, with all his knowledge and experience, found the pull of the world greater than the attraction of Christ (2 Timothy 4:10). What a tragedy that his knowledge of Christ outweighed his love for Him!

Take Inventory

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Let not the children of this age be wiser in this respect than the children of the kingdom. It is good to keep short accounts with God. Here are some questions that will help.

* Do conditions alarm me as they used to, or am I becoming so accustomed to them that I am accepting them?

* Am I now countenancing things that formerly I shunned? For instance, did I once have a higher standard for observing the Lord's Day (Sunday) as a day of rest, worship, and service for the Master? Or has the sense of sacredness been merged with the clamor of business and pleasure?

* What is my attitude toward apparel? Did I once feel that the admonitions in 1 Timothy 2:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:3-4 were expressions of the divine standard, and that I must be a testimony in my appearance as well as in my speech? Or do I now feel that times have changed and that we must show the world we are normal?

* What about amusements? Do I now think that I have been too narrow, and that I must have a more realistic approach, and broaden my views? One of the traits of the last days is that men are "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4). Let us beware lest in our efforts to relax, we unloose!

* Do I find a response or a repulsion to reading the Scriptures, prayer and attendance at the place of worship? Can I leave my Bible closed for days at a time without missing it? Am I trying to live "by bread alone," and starving my soul, which lives by "every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord?" (Deuteronomy 8:3)?

* Do I "say" my prayers, or pray? Is my praying simply a matter of duty and habit, or is it a burning essential to my program? Do I have to be drawn to the house of worship by the bait of a cookie and a cup of tea, or does love unhesitatingly carry me there?

* Is my relation to God a personal or a professional one? If the former, then I am enjoying fellowship with Him without parading the facts to others, for my reward is His own presence. If the latter, then I am merely keeping up appearances. I find it more important to polish the outside of the cup than to keep the inside clean. My religious performance is for the sake of my profession, not because of any pursuit of God.

* Do I love the Lord Jesus Christ personally? I may love His work for the sheer enjoyment of being noticed and keeping active. I may love His people (certain ones only) because of personal delight in their company. But this is not the same as love to the Lord Himself. The real test is my attitude toward and relation to Him. Then both my love to others and my work for Him will be what it should.

Call Sin by Its Right Name

Let us make no excuses because of our religious experience or supposed spirituality. The Ephesian church, with all its zeal and steadfastness, was called upon to repent! This was the only course left, for though they were still on a high spiritual level, they had fallen from their

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former higher level.

Act at once! The Master points out our condition in order that He might cure us! But unless we acknowledge our need, and humble ourselves before Him, there is no alternative but to remove the candlestick. Even that which we think we have (our candlestick of profession and organization) will be taken away if the flame of love has died! For a candlestick has no function except to hold the light.

And in our response, let us see that we act as individuals. If we wait for the whole group to respond, we may wait in vain. Whatever light God has brought to you and me--in that we must walk.

During World War I, gas attacks became prominent. But the gas was odorless, and therefore deadly. Its presence was undetectable. The men in the trenches devised the expedient of taking canaries with them. When these little birds were found drooping and dying, then the soldiers knew that gas was in the air, and they hastened to their gas masks.

Keep the melody of God's love ringing in your heart! Love for the Lord puts a song in the heart, but when love waxes cold, the song dies. Has praise ceased in your life? Are you fretting instead of singing? The silence of the song bird is the signal for alarm. The gas attack is on! The love of many is waxing cold. The deadly atmosphere of the last days is putting us to sleep. *"Watch ye therefore...lest coming suddenly He find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch!"* (Mark 13:35-37).

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