

Commanded to love – The beginning of a slow journey

We are commanded to love others. This is a strange thing. Can love be commanded? Can we simply love another at will? In daily experience, it seems that we are quite quickly either attracted to or repelled by certain people that we meet. How is it possible to intentionally love just one other person, much less everyone?

One solution is to simply define love as an action. In this case, “love” would be identical to something like “acting lovingly”. To say that, “Jaime loves Brienne” would just be equivalent to saying, “Jaime acts lovingly towards Brienne”. But when we think about it, this seems unsatisfactory. Consider the case where Jaime actually despises Brienne and has deep resentment for her. He really can’t stand being in her presence, and if given a choice, would very much rather not have any interactions with her whatsoever. However, Jaime is a good Christian and buys into this definition of love. So he acts the relevant way towards Brienne. Imagine that all of his outward manifestations are loving, kind, and considerate. This is an extreme example, but it is extreme in order to prove a point – one can act lovingly towards another without actually loving the other. So it seems that although action might be a constitutive part of love, it can’t be all that love is, there must be more.

What the above solution fails to recognize is that actions stem from desires. The thought experiment also shows that in order to love another, it takes more than mere action, one must have the right sorts of desires for and towards the other person as well. It’s not enough to simply do things for the other person to count as loving. But then we hit a problem – we aren’t in direct control of our desires. “The heart wants what the heart wants”. So if love requires right desire, how can we genuinely love if we cannot directly “alter” our desires? Is there an indirect path to desire transformation?

Going into psychotherapy, I’ve had to open sincerely to the truth of myself. This involves delving into my past, my formative years, early caregivers, formative experiences, traumas, etc. and re-experiencing them in the presence of another (and God). I’ve begun to see just how broken I am inside, in spite of the calm, nice, well put-together self that is presented to the friends, family, and society. There is deep brokenness within that is still there. In carefully and prayerfully attending to my own past and experiences, I came to see how much of a “survival mode” I was in growing up. All children grow up assaulted by all kinds of psychological and emotional trauma, intentional or unintentional, and they all do what they must to deal with it. Most repress trauma, by sheer force of will “shove” it down so it’s never raised to their conscious awareness because if it ever becomes conscious, it would be too much to handle and still be a functioning father/mother/employee at the same time. “Trauma” here is used very broadly in the sense of “any painful psychological/emotional experience that causes psychic friction/pain within the self that cannot be shown publicly”. Going back, I saw and attended to the different kinds of trauma that I experienced, and the different kinds of defense mechanisms that I subconsciously employed to deal with them. Either to keep them repressed, away from my own awareness, or simply to keep them out of the awareness of other people, so they wouldn’t see me “in my bad”. It wasn’t a pleasant experience, and still isn’t because I’m still in the midst of it.

But I have been noticing something change within me. I’ve begun to realize that the form of my history is not unique to me. Every person experiences some form of this in their early formative years. Every child is traumatized and brutalized psychologically and emotionally (perhaps Asians more than

other cultures due to the explicit emphasis on “face” and the need to present virtue). I’ve begun to see how my own experiences and history, in a sense, ‘forced’ me into becoming the kind of person I am today. This is just to say that the explanation of current character always has roots into one’s past and formative experiences. Character is never simply a matter of the will. Most have very good wills, but they do not have the character to sustain it. Few parents will that they get angry at their children, or ignore them, or abuse them. In fact, they will the exact opposite. They will the good for their children, they will that they be patient, loving, understanding to their child. But their character fails them, and character is deeply rooted in one’s history.

As I saw that everyone deals with this, I began to feel a sort of expanding of my heart. I began to, in my interactions with people, especially difficult people, start to wonder, “What sort of things has this person experienced in their formative years? What sort of character traits did he/she have to take on in order to survive in whatever family/environment/culture he/she was in? What sorts of trauma has this person been through that have shaped them to be the kind of person they are today? What is his/her story?” I felt my heart slowly cracking open. This person who is pissing me off, getting on my nerves, saying things that seem stupidly absurd to me, is not so different from me after all. He’s just trying to survive. Life is hard, and all of us do what we must to survive. Our characters are the way they are today because they have enabled us to navigate the world and semi-thrive in it. Our characters are to be lamented, but also to be grateful for. This is a strange tension to sit in. If our souls weren’t formed into the way they are today, we might not have survived till today.

In this I began to experience what it means to truly open to another. To begin to genuinely have compassion for another through recognizing their brokenness. This isn’t something that you can imbibe from merely reading about someone talking about it (as you are reading what I’m saying now), it is a reality that must be experienced and received for yourself. It cannot be directly willed by the intellect – you cannot will yourself into genuine compassion for another. The capacity to truly identify with another deep down requires that you experience your own brokenness first, otherwise there is nothing for the other to be identified with in your own life. My heart still reacts very instinctively and powerfully in all sorts of unfortunate ways to other people today, but I routinely find myself being opened wondering about the other’s history and what sorts of brokenness they have gone through. That makes it very difficult to remain annoyed/angry to that degree with the other. It certainly doesn’t take away all of the negative feelings, but it does bring it down a peg.

In Luke 7, Jesus teaches this explicitly. “He who is forgiven little, loves little.” Jesus is clearly not saying that some people have less to be forgiven of than others, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There isn’t such a thing as “more a sinner” or “less a sinner”. So what does Jesus mean “he who is forgiven little”? He means he who *recognizes* he has been forgiven little, loves little. That is, he who *thinks* he has little to be forgiven of, is able to love only little. There is a direct correlation between how much you realize you need forgiveness, and your capacity to love. The more forgiveness you realize you need, the larger your capacity to love. But this implies something very unpleasant and disturbing – in order for your capacity to love to enlarge, you must enter into your own brokenness. You must see for yourself just how much you need forgiveness, not just at your conversion, but every single day, coming to the genuine realization that “I need Jesus” every day. Most of us would like to feel that way, but the reality of it is that we don’t, and that’s just the truth of it. We don’t really believe John 15:5 “without me you can do nothing”, and that’s fine to acknowledge.

But this also sets up a very troubling trajectory for the nature of the Christian life. It is not primarily an experience of moral improvement, or virtue-accumulation, or even increasing power/control; in fact quite the opposite. It is a trajectory downward and inward into the depth of one's own soul, where you allow the Holy Spirit to take you down into your depths, because it is **only** in your brokenness that you will find your deep need for Christ.