

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Love

### LOVE AND SITUATION-ETHICS

We have already encountered the term *love* several times.

Among other things, love occurred in the context of a warning (Chapter Four): Watch out for motifs! Do not make love the main thing without having an eye for the concrete commandments which God has given (especially in the Decalogue); God has given us not only the commandment to love, but He has also said *what* we are to pursue in love. The second time that love was mentioned it occurred in a context concerning the unity of all the commandments. No commandment can truly be fulfilled if love is missing. This last point is so evident that the Scriptures can refer to love as the *great* commandment (Matthew 22:38). We must love God and our neighbour as ourselves. Another commandment, greater than these two, does not exist (Mark 12:31). Jesus proclaimed the commandment of love as a *new* commandment (John 13:34). Further, love is called the fulfilment of the law. It does not harm our neighbour and for that reason love is the fulfilment of the law (Romans 13:8-10).

Since these are such strong statements, is it not possible to navigate with just the compass of love to guide us? Are we not able to say along with Augustine: *dilige et quod vis fac* — love and do as you please?<sup>19</sup> Above all in the Christian type of situation-ethics, love is pointed to as the only necessary norm. By situation-ethics we mean those ethics which would determine actions completely on the basis of the situation. There are no general commandments in situation-ethics. Each time, man makes a free decision depending on a particular situation.

Situation-ethics have been advanced enormously by existential philosophy, which views man not as a bound but rather as a free being, always free in order to choose and to realize himself.

In order to avoid misunderstandings: Whoever does not adhere to situation-ethics, nevertheless does take the situation, the circumstances into account. Aristotle already pointed out in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that the acting person himself must judge according to the correct circumstances, just like it occurs in medicine and navigation too.<sup>20</sup>

Medieval scholasticism employed the following memory-aid:

*quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis,  
cur, quomodo, quando?*

<sup>19</sup> Augustine in Ep. Ioan. 7,5, cited by Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*. The New Morality, Philadelphia 1966, 79. Fletcher points out that it is not (as often indicated): "*ama et fac quod vis*" (love with desire and do what you please), but "*dilige et quod vis, fac*" (love with care and *then* what you will do). "It was not antinomianism" in Augustine, adds Fletcher.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II, 1,2.

That means: who, what, where, with what kind of assistance, why, in what way, when? In this way they attempted to bring the different aspects of the circumstances into view. Another poem expresses it like this:

I keep six honest serving men,  
They taught me all I knew;  
Their names are What and Why and When  
And How and Where and Who.<sup>21</sup>

Have we thereby ended up in situation-ethics? No, because situation-ethics proceeds beyond simply taking the circumstances into account. It does not allow the commandment to come *into* the situation, but rather lets the commandment *arise from* the situation. Fixed rules and norms do not exist independent of the situation. Good and bad must be determined from the situation itself.

In his book, *Situation Ethics*, Joseph Fletcher sets out to give a Christian framework to situation-ethics. To him there is just one *intrinsic* value, that is to say, one value which qualifies as “good” in and of itself, therefore apart from all other matters: love. He acknowledges that love cannot be deduced from the situation with our understanding. But, according to him, this is just as much the case if you view something else as the highest good; for example, pleasure (in hedonism). Fletcher says plainly that every moral judgment or value judgment is an axiom. You do not come up with a position to be proved, but with a *decision*. He says along with Bernard of Clairvaux: *amo quia amo*, I love because I love.

Fletcher considers the norm of love to be sufficient. He wants to have nothing to do with rules and laws derived from nature or from the Scriptures. Everything except love is *extrinsically* determined. In other words, nothing is either good or bad in and of itself. Something *is* not good or bad, but rather it *becomes* good or bad through the situation, in the light of the only norm of love.

Fletcher also offers all kinds of examples to illustrate his position that we can manage with love as the only norm. Among other things, he tells how a German woman was being held prisoner by the Russians in the Ukraine. Her husband had returned to Berlin from the front and after weeks of searching had found his children. In this dismal situation of hunger, chaos and fear, they all needed their wife and mother badly. But this woman could only get out of the prison camp if she became pregnant. In that case, she would be sent back to Germany because she was a burden to the Russians anyway. The woman chose this route out of love for her husband and children.

A clear example! To Fletcher, adultery is not a sin if it is done in love.<sup>22</sup>

At this point we could also reflect on the figure of Sonja in Dostoevsky’s book, *Crime and Punishment*. Out of love for her family, the girl becomes a prostitute. She makes this sacrifice in order to provide for her family. Thielicke

<sup>21</sup> Mentioned in Fletcher, *op. cit.*, 90. The “*quibus auxiliis*” (with which aids) is omitted here.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, 57ff., 47 (*amo quia amo*), 164f. (example of adultery).

also keeps open the possibility that we are dealing with an acceptable action here. According to Thielicke the New Testament views fornication as a hindrance to letting the Spirit work in us (I Corinthians 6:9ff.). Partaking of the table of demons, about which I Corinthians 10:21 speaks, is just as strong a *prohibitivum*, to use one of Thielicke's terms. But Thielicke nevertheless does not wish to condemn Sonja's action. She may violate the *letter* of the law, but something like that only becomes a *prohibitivum* if someone lets himself be *enslaved* by such fornication. "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything" (I Corinthians 6:12). Driven by love, Sonja did not place herself under the dominion of idols. According to Thielicke, she remained free.<sup>23</sup>

## YEAST AND DOUGH

Are we really capable of sufficing with love as the only norm for our actions? Concerning this question the following remarks can be made:

1. The fact that human society is so complex, already makes it impossible to employ love as the only norm. It has been correctly said that even if all people were good people and acted constantly out of love, traffic regulations and time-tables would still be necessary.

2. It is not true that every situation is unique and requires repeated reflection on a new action. Fortunately that is not necessary. For who would not collapse in exhaustion if he had to constantly ask himself what to do now again? Much transpires automatically, because very many situations are (approximately) the same. Even the unique situations which Fletcher gives as examples happen more than once and therefore let themselves be generalized. Situations undoubtedly differ; but in spite of the difference there is so much similarity that it is possible to have general rules for our conduct. Commandments and laws, therefore, are not at all strange, but rather indispensable. No court of law would be able to make a decision on the basis of a consistent situation-ethics, because what is a court of law without laws? And how can there be laws if there are no similar situations in which the laws can be applied?

3. It is certainly true that love is the great commandment and that we are nothing without love (I Corinthians 13:1ff.). But that is not to say that love exists without the commandments. Love itself is termed a commandment (Matthew 22:38ff.; John 13:34), and is something lined up next to other commandments (or virtues), such as in I Timothy 4:12 ("Set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity") and in I Timothy 6:11 ("Aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness").

Nowhere does love stand over and against a commandment. For Jesus says: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (John

<sup>23</sup> H. Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik* I, 118ff.

15:10). Whoever keeps God's commandments, or (what amounts to the same thing) keeps God's Word, in him God's love is made complete (I John 2:3ff.). The one time it can be said that faith is working through love (Galatians 5:6), the other time that what counts is keeping God's commandments (I Corinthians 7:19). After all, love for God is working by keeping His commandments (I John 5:3), or by walking in obedience to His commandments (II John 6).

4. It is true that love is called the fulfilment of the law (Romans 13:10). But that means that no true, full obedience to the law is possible without love. Otherwise obedience would become legalism and formalism. Love is the fulfilment of the law, but not its *replacement*. Whoever loves, Paul says, does no wrong to his neighbour, and *therefore* he does not make himself guilty of adultery, killing, stealing, coveting, etc. (Romans 13:9f.).

Love is the compass but the commandments are the map. Or to use another illustration: Love and the commandments relate to each other like yeast to dough. The former must permeate the latter in order to obtain good bread.

5. When Jesus calls love a *new* commandment (John 13:34), also this does not indicate that love can replace the commandments. The commandment of love was "new" in a particular sense, because it can also be called an old commandment. For when Jesus formulated the double-commandment of love towards God and towards our neighbour (Matthew 22:37ff.), He concurred with something already to be found in the Old Testament. Leviticus 19:18 speaks about "loving your neighbour as yourself," and Deuteronomy 6:5 about loving "God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." But what is *new* about this love is to be found in Jesus Himself: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; *even as I have loved you, that you also love one another*" (John 13:34) are the precise words. The mutual brotherly love of the disciples will be the fruit of the love of Christ, on account of which He gave Himself over to death for them. The commandment of love will rest upon a new foundation. Christ's sacrifice makes real *Christian* love possible. That is what is new in all that is old. It has already been pointed out that it is not possible to speak about the commandments of God without Christ. Exactly the same thing applies to love. Whoever wants to get a true picture of love must look to Christ.

6. W.H. Velema is right when he says that he would rather not speak about love as the *highest* norm. A hierarchy is then set up. There are commandments, but sometimes they have to give way to the highest norm, to love. It is then once again easy to devalue the commandment at the cost of love. But the commandment has to be obeyed out of love. Love does not swallow up the law because love does justice to the law.<sup>24</sup>

Love can very well lead to soften our judgment concerning disobedience to God's law. Some sins weigh heavier than others. We would judge Sonja

<sup>24</sup> W.H. Velema, "De liefde is de vervulling van de wet," in: *Uw knecht hoort*. Theologische opstellen aangeboden aan W. Kremer, J. van Genderen en B.J. Oosterhoff, Amsterdam 1979, 117.

more mildly than a prostitute who refuses to bid her career farewell. But that does not mean that we should approve of Sonja's behaviour.

## AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO UNTO YOU

What we have said above concerning love, can just as easily be applied to the so-called *Golden Rule*. "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). This rule is termed a fulfilment of the law and prophets, exactly as love is. But this rule too cannot function well without a particular *content*. For it can be interpreted in various ways.

The rule can be interpreted *egotistically*. Starting with our own feelings about what is pleasant or unpleasant, we conceive what we would want from another person. Kant was of the opinion that somebody could appeal to the Golden Rule if he dispensed with showing benevolence towards another, on account of the fact that he did not desire the same benevolence from another for himself. And a criminal would also know what to do with the Golden Rule over and against a judge who wanted to impose punishment on him. Someone who does not take the marriage vows seriously could want his spouse to take the same attitude.

We can also interpret the rule in a *utilitarian* way: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you *so that* they do what you want. A sort of *do ut des*. I give in order that you give. One good turn deserves another. In this case we are less egotistical about our own interests and still pay some attention to our neighbour too, but then again ultimately to serve ourselves.

The rule can also be employed in a more sympathetic way by interpreting it in an *axiological* manner. I then do not judge the behaviour of my neighbour in a self-centred way, but much more objectively: on the basis of values which are highly esteemed in society. We see much more clearly and lucidly when someone misbehaves towards us than when we misbehave towards them. The speck of sawdust in the eye of another person is usually noticed sooner than the log in our own eye (Matthew 7:3ff.).

Now then, for that reason it is a good idea to employ the same standard we applied to others when measuring our own behaviour. But then we are again dependent in this proper use on a *norm not given by this rule itself, but by something else*. Just as with love, that content is given to us by the law and the prophets! *In and of themselves* love and the Golden Rule provide no ethics, but rather they presume an ethics. They can summarize the commandments but they do not produce them.

## THREE KINDS OF LOVE

If it is good, love colours all our actions. It can take on various forms, but it is indispensable everywhere. Here we can employ the three forms of love

which H. van Oyen distinguishes. For this he uses three Greek words: *agapè*, *philia* and *erōs*.<sup>25</sup>

*Agapè* is the love of surrender, which claims to take the demand of self-denial seriously in following Christ. It always contains a *choice*. At this point I would like to point to Mark 12:28ff., in which a Pharisee asks Jesus what the most important commandment is. Jesus then answers: "The first is: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your might. The second is this, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." The quotation from Deuteronomy 6 about the *one* Lord *and* the commandment to love Him belong together. Love is the choice for the one God, the one Lord Jesus, the one Name above all other Names.

This choice for God and for the neighbour whom He places on our path implies that we do *not* choose something else: the lust of the flesh, of the eyes and of the pride of life. For in that case we would choose for the world. But if we love the world, the love of the Father is not in us (I John 2:15f.).

This form of love is not something that is self-evident and will often conflict with our own desires and preferences. Consider the commandment that we have to love our enemies and have to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44).

Van Oyen indicates the *second* form of love with another Greek word for love: *philia*. In this he sees love for the organization of life. It holds normal life together: family, friendship, the society in which everyone should get what is rightfully his.

What van Oyen says here can also be found in Augustine. Love is intent on peace among men, an ordered union in which we should harm no-one and in which, as far as is possible, we should be of use to everyone (*De Civitate Dei*, 19.14).

Love and justice must be united in society. That reveals itself when governments take the side of the suffering, the oppressed and the persecuted (Jeremiah 22:3, 15ff.; Psalm 72). For that reason we cannot separate politics and justice from love. Love governs all life. It does not possess its own sphere, does not want to come in as a guest, but wants to fill everything with its qualities.<sup>26</sup>

Bluntly put, the sword of the civil authorities can be seen as an instrument of love, even in waging a just war. Luther was able to make such a statement while thinking of the struggle against the Turks. Is the protection of our borders not an act of love?

This consideration will protect us from speaking about love considering exclusively the Sermon on the Mount and *not at all* considering the sword of the civil authorities in Romans 13. The civil authorities are described as stand-

<sup>25</sup> H. van Oyen, *Evangelische Ethik*, 115ff.

<sup>26</sup> S.J. Ridderbos, *Ethiek van het liefdegebod*. Compromis/Tragiek, Kampen 1975.

ing in the service of God, *for our benefit* (vs. 4). Why should their good actions not be a form of love, even though that love is far less personal than in the more direct relationships of man to man?

The third form of love Van Oyen calls *erōs* — once again a Greek word for love. In this he sees the love of sensual attraction and the procreation of new life. This love has everything to do with desire and affection. Van Oyen extends it to non-sexual spheres by also including the products of culture and technology.