

YOU CAN'T TAKE LOVE FOR GRANTED

A sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

"But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, and keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live... But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die" Ezekiel 18:21,22,24.

These are words of comfort and of concern. We do not need to be afraid of the penalty for past sins if we repent. The Lord won't remember the weaknesses of bygone days. On the other hand, we cannot trade on our past goodness if we sin in the present.

The message is very clear. It is what we do in the present that matters. We cannot build up credit with the Lord and then sin for a while. Our old goodness is then of no use.

This text highlights a most important rule of life. It is simply this: You can't take love for granted. If someone loves you, you must continue to court that love in the present, and in all the days that are to come.

At first this might seem like a disquieting idea. Does it mean that we can never be sure of someone's love? Does it mean that maybe one day someone we love will stop loving us because "you can't count on that love"? Not at all. Love is a gift from the Lord. It will never cease to flow into the hearts of people to warm them.

The point is that we must receive that love. We must do something to make it our own. And we must receive, freely act to receive the love offered by someone else, or else it will wither away for the lack of nurturing.

No one likes to be taken for granted, because the person who is doing so seems to be saying, "You don't mean very much to me." Yet we have a tendency to take love for granted, and to take advantage of it. A young couple gets married. He loves her deeply at first. He tells her so, he finds special ways of showing how much she means to him. But then he gets involved in his work, and used to having her at home. He comes home late and tells her his problems, but when she tries to get him to help with the children or to discuss the problems at home he tells her how tired he is and how he doesn't have the energy to deal with those things now. Slowly he stops communicating with her as a treasured, special person. He comes home and turns on the television (insisting on the channel he wants), or buries himself in a book or a hobby.

Maybe she continues to give of herself, showing understanding for the pressures he's under, and he finds that her service to his emotional needs is pleasant. Instead of giving in

return he expects support more and more. He is trading on her love, taking it for granted. After all, she's his wife, she promised to love him, he is sure of her love. Sometimes, perhaps, he is kind and attentive, but she senses that it is usually when he wants something special from her.

She cannot help it. Her love begins to wither away. You see, in the past it fed itself on the respect she felt for him and on the sense that his concern for her was an unselfish, caring one. Maybe he thought it was. But his behavior in the present is untrue to that love. It is saying, louder than words, that he does not think her love is worth courting and nurturing at this moment of time.

This is an extreme example, but perhaps it points to a tendency in all of us to assume the love of somebody instead of seeking that love anew.

We mustn't do so. We cannot take love for granted, we must seek it anew each day. For it is a spiritual law that although love is always offered to us by the Lord, it is not ours unless we choose it, and continue to choose it in the present.

Let us reflect on this idea. First of all, notice how all the things of this earth are constantly being created anew. The food your body eats doesn't last. You need to eat again and again. Almost all the cells of your body are renewed regularly. Your garden is constantly changing, because it is being recreated by the Lord. A tree grows; even the mountains are not the same, although they change more slowly.

This is because if a thing is to last it has to be recreated constantly (CL 86, cf. 183). It is the nature of love to act. Love has to act, each single day. If it stops acting, it begins to wither.

Why does the Lord require that love be renewed each day? Because the one thing that we have that is truly our own is freedom of choice. When we choose something it becomes ours. We don't exercise that choice once and not again. We feel life as our own because we exercise choice all the time. The Lord wants us to choose love again, and again and again, and in each choice to find our blessedness. More than anything He wants us to choose, again and again, to love that one person who will be closer to us than anyone else.

There is another reason for this aspect of love. When we fall in love with someone we are far from perfect. There is someone else we love a great deal - ourselves. Love of self is actually the opposite of true marriage love, and if we don't actively choose, and continue to choose conjugal love, we revert to the natural state into which we were born - loving ourselves the most.

We must not take love for granted. Yet, people may ask, shouldn't we expect some gratitude for past kindness? Doesn't the care of the past mean anything in the present? The Writings for the New Church certainly speak of such gratitude. A husband, for example, regards his wife with kindness and favor, because she bore their children, and fed and cared for them "with unwearying care" (CL 284). Yes, we owe a debt of gratitude for past kindness. But that is very different from expecting gratitude for past kindness! For a husband to feel gratitude is proper. For a wife to require it is less so, and certainly she must not trade on it.

But aren't there times when we have to take someone's love for granted? What about when we are sick or under tremendous pressure? If a man is facing such things won't he hope he can count on his wife to support him? Inevitably he will be somewhat wrapped up in himself. If he is sick he will be concentrating on getting well; if under great pressure, most of his effort will be spent on getting through each day. He will be asking a great deal of the person who loves him.

At such times his wife would want him to count on her love, to take it for granted, and not to worry that he is giving so little in return. However that cannot become a permanent condition. Sometimes we receive more than we give, but it should be with the intention that the time will come when we can reverse the roles, and let our love be an active force, going out to benefit the other. A dependent role can only be temporary in any healthy relationship.

What about the dependency of old age? Don't aged parents have to take their children's love for granted? Don't they have to resign themselves to receiving far more than they give? Yes, they do. But have you noticed how much people of the older generation worry about this? They worry about being a burden. Why? Because the love inside of them, which is not old, but is ever young, is longing to be active, to nurture and give to those it cares for. They feel, very deeply, their inability to return kindness, and they show it by expressions of gratitude.

We cannot deny that age brings infirmity, pain, and frailty, and people have to concentrate more on themselves than they would if they were healthy. But it is also a fact that we do not fully appreciate as yet the true contribution which the older generation makes to our society. We notice it sometimes. We see a grandmother smile and it lights up the room. We see how little children and the aged seem to respond to each other, as if they share of bond of innocence that is not known to the rest of us. But as a culture we tend to measure someone's contribution to society in terms of things done, not as much in the sphere of love which flows forth, often silently, to touch the lives of others. We tend to measure wisdom in terms of things spoken, not so much in terms of the patience with and understanding of others which belongs more to advanced age. One day the Writings will enable us to become truly sensitive to the contributions which old age can make to our culture.

In the meantime, the aged appear to take love for granted, but they don't. They are perhaps more truly appreciative of it than anyone else.

Are there not some people whose love we can take for granted? What about a mother's love, or a grandfather's? Don't we take advantage of Mom, knowing she will always be there, no matter what? Doesn't her love endure, even when it is not properly treated? In a sense, yes; but the simple fact is that its quality will depend on how we treat it. If we abuse it, it will change shape over the years. From being a beautiful and trusting thing it will become more reserved. It will have certain calluses where it has been hurt, there will be a quality of sadness to it. But if we court it, it will deepen and become both more mature and more gentle.

But let us return to marriages. If love is to endure, it must be cultivated each day. It can feed for a little while on the past, but not forever.

Yet doesn't it get recharged by our memories of past states? Don't we love to look back on our courting days, on our honeymoon, on the day when our first child was born? Don't we indulge ourselves with those familiar words, "Do you remember...?"

Of course we do. Every state of love in the past which we have freely chosen remains with us as a part of our lives. It is woven into the fabric of our spirits, and it can return. One of the beautiful teachings in the Writings, however, is that when we freely recall these states, when we choose to remember them, they cease to be memories of the past, they become a part of the present. Not only does the memory return, but all the joy of that state, and it becomes a present joy.

Yes, it is true that love builds on the past. It grows stronger with each new memory. The point is that it does so because in each present moment we choose to remember our love, and we choose to make it our own. Those words, "Do you remember...?" are a way of saying, "I love to remember, because I love you."

Let us never take love for granted. Let every husband continue to court his wife for as long as he lives upon this earth and to eternity in heaven. He won't court her as he did before they were married, but he can be solicitous of her good opinion, anxious to behave in ways that will serve her, happy, in a deep and mature way when he reflects on the fact that she still loves him. Let every wife actively accept her husband's love and foster it, and use the wisdom with which the Lord has endowed her to turn his affections into useful paths.

The same principle applies to all human relationships. Whether with children, parents, or friends, we should nurture the bond that we share, not take it for granted.

For it is a paradox of life that if we never take love for granted, we can be sure it will always be there. If we work each present moment to foster it, then every act of choice brings with it a new delight, and that delight adds itself to all the ones that have gone before, and our love grows from a small stream into a mighty river.

But even the Amazon needs to be replenished at its source. By our acts of choice we keep in touch with the author of love, and He will ensure that there is an ample supply for us, every day of eternity. Amen.

Lessons: Ezekiel 18; CL 183:3; TCR 347:3.

Ezekiel 18:20-32:

"The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. "But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely

live; he shall not die. "None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. "Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" says the Lord GOD, "and not that he should turn from his ways and live? "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die. "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' Hear now, O house of Israel, is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair? "When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies. "Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive. "Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. "Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' O house of Israel, is it not My ways which are fair, and your ways which are not fair? "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways," says the Lord GOD. "Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. "Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? "For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies," says the Lord GOD. "Therefore turn and live!"

CL 461:5: The activity of love is what makes the sensation of delight. In heaven its activity is with wisdom, in hell it is with insanity.

CL 183:3: The angels replied that love and wisdom without use are merely abstract ways of thinking, which also after a brief stay in the mind, pass away like winds. 'But,' they said, 'these two are gathered together in use. There they become one, what is called reality. Love cannot rest except in action, for love is the very principle which gives activity to life. Nor can wisdom come into and remain in being, except as the result of love and by acting together with it. Action is use. So we arrive at the definition of use: doing good out of love through wisdom. Use is goodness itself.