

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC ABUSE

John 13:34-35, 1 Tim 3:2, Ephesians 5:3-5

'A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.'

Jesus' command to 'love one another' is a theme running through the whole New Testament and is a mantra for all of us as we try to live a Christian life.

This exhortation is running through the New Testament because, like us, the people of the first century kept going astray and getting it all wrong. Paul, writing to a new minister, Timothy, spells out what is expected of Christian leaders: *'they must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.'*

To the Ephesians Paul writes: *'Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.'*

Paul would not have mentioned these things if they were not happening, so we can assume that even the Christians were indulging in such dreadful practices.

That's all well and good, but it relates to a very different society from the one we live in today. We can read about it and view it, perhaps rather smugly, from afar. We can do that, but we shouldn't, because the reality is that all those things are still happening. After 2000 years of reading and teaching, people, including Christians, are still guilty of all these things – and worse. In the first-century culture, some things were considered normal which we abhor now. In our culture and society, there are things that would be unthinkable for them. None of them should be taking place and, as Christians, it's our duty to do what we can to stop this appalling behaviour.

In the first century, houses were more open, people knew what was going on, and justice was administered locally. It was acceptable, but not right, that women were stoned for adultery, never the man who was also involved. Jesus showed them a different and better way of dealing with adultery. Slavery was part of their society, but cruelty to slaves was something else that was unacceptable to Jesus. He treated outcasts with love, men and women as equal and he valued children. All these things were counter-culture, revolutionary and shocking to many people.

This is the way of Jesus; he is our leader and exemplar. Christians should not accept wrong behaviour just because 'everyone else does it,' or because doing nothing is the easy option. We should never be afraid of doing the right thing.

We need to be active in living out 'love one another'; we need to be aware and active to help those around us who are living in misery and those in other countries whose lives are a misery.

In our society, houses are well spaced, family and neighbours don't like to interfere and very often the appalling events take place in secret places removed from the hearing or eyes of other people. We all think we live in a 'nice' neighbourhood, with 'nice' people who don't hurt each other at home.

Domestic abuse has no barriers! It takes place in the humblest one-room rented place, in the grandest house with a long drive behind electric gates, in high rise flats, in terraces, cul-de-sacs and housing estates. It's happening far away in other countries and it's happening in *your* village, town or city. Domestic abuse has no barriers and generally is not apparent unless the victim speaks to someone, which is an incredibly difficult thing to do.

'Love one another' is suddenly more challenging. Of course, we love one another, but how do we express that love? A couple on their wedding day mean what they say when they make their loving promises to each other. They intend to live in peace and harmony together for the rest of their lives. But how easily love can turn to hate, how quickly love can become domineering, manipulative and demanding.

In the wedding service, man and wife promise to 'love and to cherish' each other. What does that word 'cherish' really mean? It means to please, to nurture, to treasure and to give each other the best they can manage. The opposite of 'cherish' is 'perish' and, if there is no cherishing, like a beautiful plant that is ignored, the uncherished will perish and die. The relationship will wither and die or become very toxic.

It's disturbing to think that, in these days, people still hurt each other, emotionally, physically, sexually or by neglect. The reasons are often very plausible, 'I was teaching him/her a lesson', 'I expect things to be done perfectly and they didn't do it right', 'they were being lazy', 'they don't do enough in the house,' 'I asked a thousand times for them to change their ways' and so it goes on. All these comments can be summed up in one phrase, 'I want my own way'.

With this continual onslaught, the abused may not realise what is actually happening. They become used to the jibes, used to the blows and are ashamed of the result, thinking it to be their own fault – after all, that's what they are being told constantly. 'If you do this, or if you do that, then things will be much better!' Or conversely, 'if you don't do this or that, I will leave or I will throw you out'. The prospect of homelessness keeps many people in abusive relationships. The prospect of never seeing their children again, especially for men, keeps them in abusive relationships.

Where does 'love one another' fit in all this? We who are observers, if we truly want to show love for all, could find the strength and courage to become involved in helping the victim. We may be shouted at or ignored; we may be treated frostily, but so what?

The abused person needs to know that someone cares, that someone could help and will listen to them. We can build up trust and help them to seek the right help. These situations need professional help, but we might be the only means through which they receive it. That's part of 'love one another'.

We hear a lot about the value of someone just 'being there' and in this case that may be all we can do. I know of couples where abuse was taking place regularly and verbally in front of friends and family. The result was that friends stopped meeting with them, family withdrew and were thankful when the couple went home after visits. I now know that the journey home was spent with criticism of all that had happened in fine detail and on arrival home punishment was meted out in the form of physical abuse, in front of children. All justified by the 'bad behaviour' of the victimised party.

Imagine dreading a celebration of your 50th birthday because you know you will be doing all the preparation, all the work at the party and all the clearing up, under strict instruction and never getting it right. This victim begged for no celebration but had to endure it and, although friends and family turned up, most left as soon as possible as the atmosphere was oppressive. When everyone had gone, the abuse increased.

As Christians who try to love one another, we have to be aware, not embarrassed; be courageous, not invisible; to confront, not ignore and to be informed of where help can be found. Befriend the person who you think may be victimised, make them feel loved, and worthy of love. People treated like this lose their self-esteem, even their identity, and are convinced that they are the cause of the problem. We can do something to make them feel good about themselves and learn to trust again. Maybe through us they will grow enough confidence to leave the relationship.

As we try to fulfil Jesus' command to 'love one another' we need to accept that part of this command is to be on guard, be alert, and be ready to serve the Lord and each other with courage and strength from the Holy Spirit.

Amen

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