

HOW DOES CHRISTIAN LOVE (NEIGHBOR LOVE) DIFFER FROM ORDINARY HUMAN LOVE IN KIERKEGAARD'S ETHICS?

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In light of the amount of space Kierkegaard gave to an authentic presentation of a worldly understanding of love (romantic love and marriage) in *Either/Or*, it is just right that he presents *his own* view explicitly in *Works of Love*. After reading about the esthetic and ethical perspectives, it is fresh air to the soul reading about a definitely Christian understanding of love. In Kierkegaard's view, the Christian idea of love is based on Jesus' words: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

"You shall love, *as yourself*". Everyone loves himself. This is the starting point. We cannot help but love ourselves. No one is closer to ourselves than we are. Some say that they love others more than self, but this is not true. It is true, however, that they usually love others more than *God*. But Christians call this blasphemy. Erotic love and friendship are based on preference. Neighbor love, however, is a love for the whole human race. There is no exception and preference in this kind of love. This love is compared by Jesus to one's love for oneself. There is only one kind of love that might transcend the love for self: love for God. When Jesus teaches about love for God he does not say that we should love God *as ourselves*, but rather that we should love God with all our beings, even more than ourselves, and definitely more than any other human beings. This love is not natural to the sinful self. Moreover, to understand neighbor love we should understand love-for-self correctly. A sinful self loves himself, for sure, but does not love himself in a right way. We should understand love-for-self in the light of neighbor love. This circular argument shows the interconnectedness of love-for-self and true Christian love.

"You *shall* love". Kierkegaard emphasizes that love is a *duty*. But love to be a duty it has to be transformed by eternity. Love should not change, but all human love is characterized by change. Unless eternity transforms it. Spontaneous love – that is, love which is not duty – is always destroyed by change, and the worst of changes is when love becomes a habit. Habit can change love even into hatred. The only thing that saves love from change is when it undergoes eternity's change and become duty.

A major difference between neighbor love (which is a duty) and all other spontaneous types of love is that neighbor love is *independent*. Spontaneous love is dependent on many things, including on the other person's reaction. When someone tells me: "I don't love you!", if I only have spontaneous love, my proud answer would be: "I don't love you, either!" But this is clearly a dependent reaction on my part. But when I see love as a duty from God, my answer to the other person's negative confession would be: "I *shall* still continue to love you!" This reaction shows that neighbor love is independent, exactly because it is dependent on the divine command. From this it also follows that when you don't love out of eternal duty, you are *in despair*. You love – with infinite passion – objects that are not God. This is despair. Spontaneous love is a sign of despair when it is independent from God's Law. But neighbor love is a love that comes from a person who was saved from despair by eternity. This love helps purify other kinds of love – romantic love

and friendship – so that they also do not come out of despair but from a divine command and a divine help.

“*You shall love*”. In neighbor love we love indiscriminately, without preference, just as God does. Therefore, Kierkegaard says, we are the most like God when we love with this kind of love. Neighbor love is different from romantic love and friendship in that it does not need consolation when the love has gone or the beloved or the friend has changed and therefore the love has changed, too. Christian love is free from this possibility of loss. You can never lose the neighbor whom you should love. He will always be around if you have eyes to see him. A love that can only love the extraordinary is not the love that characterizes God. Only love for the neighbor “has the perfections of eternity”. Neighbor love recognizes the eternal truth that similarity is more important in our humanity than dissimilarity. Romantic love and friendship recognizes similarity, therefore, they are lower than the eternal.

Neighbor love sees the individual in his actuality, not in his ideal form. When we love on condition that the other person does not have any of those characteristics which we do not like, or when we only love him or her because he or she fulfills those things that we desire them to have in themselves, this is not Christian love. Christian love is a love that does not sorrow over the other person’s deficiencies but loves him or her even despite of those. This love is infinite and free. It cannot change for it does not expect anything. Human love that is conditional on the other person’s “loveability” introduces a third party into the relationship. This third party is the ideal image, which is really an offense to the person we love. Neighbor love does not introduce this third party. The only third party that is introduced is God himself. But he is not an expectation from – or an ideal of – the other person, but an infinite source of love for the one who loves.

Kierkegaard’s teaching on neighbor love is a clear attack on Romanticism that preached the doctrine of spontaneity as the only justification for real love. But it is also an attack on the kantian “*categoricus imperativus*” in that Kierkegaard originates authentic Christian love from a relationship with the living God as the only source for such a task. Christian love is, therefore, different from an esthetic or an ethical understanding of love. It is infinitely different.