

Learning to Love



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LEARNING TO LOVE

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By

JAMES RUSSELL MILLER

LIFE IS AN EDUCATION IN LOVE. – HUGH BLACK

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Cover image “Four of the five Malcolm family siblings served during the First World War. This portrait was taken after their return home.” from Australian War Memorial.

Unabridged.



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Learning to love is a long lesson. It takes all of the longest life to learn it. The most inveterate obstacle in mastering the lesson is self, which persists with an energy which nothing but divine grace can overcome. When no longer we seek our own in any of our relations with others, we have learned to love. Until then we still need to stay in Christ's school.

J. R. M.

Philadelphia, U.S.A.

If we cannot live at once and alone with Him, we may at least live with those who have lived with Him.

Martineau.



It is a great thing to sacrifice; it is a greater to consent not to sacrifice in one's own way.

Charlotte Yonge.

Learning To Love

The test of love is service. The love which does not give and do to the utmost is not love. To live for one's self in any way, in any degree, is to leave a blur, a blemish, on the life, however attractive it may be in other regards.

Transfiguration is not splendor that glows and flashes in light — transfiguration is love. Nothing else shines. The most brilliant life as men rate life is tame and lusterless till it begins to serve, and then instantly glory begins to radiate from it. There is more true glory in one homely act of self-denial, in one deed of thoughtful kindness, in one moment of patient serving of another, than in a whole Sinai of clouds and lightnings.

There is a legend of one of the shepherds who was kept at home, watching a friend in fever, the night the angels came to Bethlehem with the announcement of the birth of the Holy Child, and sang their songs of joy. The other shepherds saw the heavenly host, heard their message and their song, and beheld the glory. Then they saw the newborn Child and their hearts were wondrously elated.

But all that night Shemuel sat alone by the restless sufferer, watched and waited. His fellow-shepherds pitied his disappointment, that he had missed the vision and the glory which they had seen. Yet in his lowly serving of the sick man Shemuel had blessing and reward of his own. He missed indeed the splendor of that night in the fields, and in his serving he gave his own life, but his eyes saw then a more wondrous glory than his fellow-shepherds had seen on the Bethlehem plains.

"Shemuel, by the fever bed,
Touched by beckoning hands that led,
Died and saw the Uncreated;
All his fellows lived and waited."

He had lingered by the bed of sickness while they were looking on the glory; now they waited amid earth's dull scenes while he witnessed the glory of the

Eternal. So it is always in life in this world. Those who sit by fever beds, ministering to human need in its countless forms, seem to miss much that is very beautiful. Their lowly ministry keeps them away from places of honor, even from scenes of spiritual ecstasy. Absorption in the duties of love in the home or among the poor causes men and women to miss much that the world esteems. But meanwhile there is a higher reward. They enter more fully into the joy of the Lord.

After all, only that life is most worth living which has in it the quality of service and sacrifice. It is only life itself that is worth giving to others. Only when we serve in love that forgets itself, — gives itself out in its serving, do we either find deep joy for ourselves or give true happiness or blessing to others.

“Seeketh not its own” is the heart of the definition of love. “Love seeketh not its own.” It never thinks of itself. It never aims at its own advancement, its own ease, its own pleasure. It always thinks of the other man. It seeks to give pleasure, to do good, not to have pleasure and to receive good. The first true aim in friendship is, not to have friends, but to be a friend. It does not ask what it can get out of a friendship, in what ways the friend is going to be helpful, but what it can do for the friend, how it can promote his interests, advance his good, be a help to him. “Love seeketh not its own.”

In one of Joseph Hocking’s stories, the old preacher, a thoughtful man, says to his young people: “My little children, love is the great divine thing of life. It is God — for God is love. Only do not mistake the alloy of love for love itself. Much of what is called love is not love at all. It is simply a desire to be loved. Love gives — the thought of taking is only secondary. Love says, ‘How can I give happiness?’ not ‘How can I get it?’ The latter is simply love for self, the desire to be loved which is but a poor, miserable caricature of love. That is why life is so poor. We mistake the desire to be loved for love itself, and try to be content. We ask, ‘How can I get?’ not ‘How can I give?’ and thus God does not come near to us, Eternal Life does not come near to us. We do not live in the light, — we only see its faint reflection. And now abideth faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love, but love seeketh not its own.”

When we think of it, what is the kind of love we usually see in people about us? The description runs, “Love seeketh not its own.” Does it never in what we call love? Then it would seem that love is not very common, for there are not many people who never seek their own, that is, put thought of themselves first. Take the matter of choosing friends. Do we think chiefly of what the friend is to

be to us? or, of what we can be to him? Must we not confess that too often it is the selfish element that is the more marked?

The forming of special personal friendships is different in a way from the common exercise of love to others. This involves a sacred relationship in which the greatest care is required. In choosing for marriage, for example, the obligation of unselfishness is mutual. In close personal friendship the same is true. The love must be on both sides. Yet here, too, the law is the same. Love must not seek its own. President King says: "There are some apparently smooth-running households that are smooth-running, not because the relations are what they ought to be, but simply because five people in the home have decided that the only way to have peace is to allow the sixth to have his own way. And this sixth person may very likely think of himself as peculiarly devoted to the happiness of the other inmates of the house. But his standpoint is that he knows far better than any of them what is good for them, and they shall have what he thinks is good for them, whether they like it or not."

But this benevolent sixth person is infinitely away from the spirit of love which Christian teaching requires. His is in no sense love that "seeketh not its own." True love does not demand its own way. Its first aim is always, not to be ministered unto, but to minister. We expect to live with our friends and to receive happiness and benefit from them. But if the love is what it should be it will always be without selfishness. Its first desire will always be to make the other happy, to bring comfort, cheer, and pleasure, and to add to the beauty and completeness of the life.

George Eliot draws a picture of such a friendship:

"What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined for life, — to strengthen each other in all labor, to rest in each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent, unspeakable memories, at the moment of the last parting?"

This is a beautiful ideal. It is the outline of a friendship in which each gives to the other the best he has to give. But we should notice that the heart of such a friendship is precisely what St. Paul indicates in his characterization, — "Love seeketh not its own." If either seeks his own, is ruled by selfishness, if self obtrudes in any phase of the fellowship, such a hallowed friendship as this is an impossibility. It is not enough that one of the two shall seek not his own — there must be two hearts beating as one in unselfishness before such a friendship can exist. The slightest trace of selfishness mars the beauty. Your friend may not always be conscious that he is thinking of your good. He may not every hour

definitely and purposely set himself the task of doing you good, curing your faults, sweetening and enriching your life; nevertheless, he desires always to be a help to you, and in every thought of you and every prayer for you, he is seeking not yours, but you, not to be helped by you, but to be your helper.

A present-day writer says: "You need friends who, by their finer insight or their hidden faith, idealize you. They take you as they know you, as you are, but behind you, within you, and above you, they see another possible man. They are looking eagerly and waiting patiently for that man to emerge. By their expectation and their faith, they help him out into the world. They are constantly saying what the master of the house said in the parable, 'Friend, go up higher.' You discover yourself anew in their very attitude toward some of your rawness and inexperience. You long to make the reality match with their faith in your capacity. It is deadly, in the long run, not to have that quality in our friends."

"I do enjoy spending the evening with Fannie," one young fellow said to another; "she always makes me feel so satisfied with myself." We like to have people make us feel satisfied with ourselves, but it may not always be the wisest and the most wholesome friendship that affects us in this way. Might it not mean more to us if the influence of our friends upon us were inspiring instead of soothing, should prove awakening and stimulating, instead of promotive of self-esteem? "Love seeketh not its own." That is, it seeks to help us, to make life mean more to us, to show us new possibilities of attainment, to start in us new desires and aspirations, to set before us new visions of beauty in character.

It may be more pleasant merely to compliment your friend on his promising immaturities, to praise and flatter his callow attainments, to make him think well of himself and satisfied with what he is; but may not such friendship in the end prove harmful instead of helpful? May it not inflate his vanity and make him content with what he is? We should take delight in pleasing others, in saying kindly things to them, in encouraging and cheering them, in complimenting them when they do well. Some people always have a depressing, chilling influence over us. They never say a word of commendation, of approval, of cheer. Instead, they criticize, disapprove, point out the defects in ourselves or in our work; at least they give the impression that they do not favorably regard what has been done by us. There is disheartenment in such withholding of praise. Some parents fail at this point. So do some teachers.

St. Paul has a suggestive word on this subject in one of his epistles. He says, first, that they that are strong should bear the infirmities of the weak. Then he adds, "Let each one of us please his neighbor for that which is good, unto

edifying.” We are to please our neighbor. That is, we are to say to him the things that will please him, make him happy, give him pleasure. We have no right to give him pain in our words to him, to be brusque, heartless, and uncivil, to restrain love, to discourage him. This exhortation is a very important one in a life of love. Good manners are part of Christianity. Grace means beauty, and nothing ungracious should ever appear in the life of one who belongs to Christ. Even if we must speak words of reproof, they should be spoken in love.

But there is a limitation which we must not overlook — we are to please him for his good, to edifying. We must never give him pleasure which would do him any hurt. Edification means building up. Whatever you say to your neighbor to please him must add something of beauty or completeness to the building of character that is going on in him. Now you may speak to your friend words which will greatly please him but will not do him good, will not edify him, will not add anything to the beauty and completeness of the building that is going up in his life. You may flatter him, and he may like it, but it will only puff him up, not build him up. You are his true friend only when you please him for his good. This you may do, not by making him feel satisfied with himself, as he is, in his faultiness and failure, but by giving him glimpses of higher things which he may be inspired to try to reach. “Love seeketh not its own.”

There is another way in which love may seek the good of friends. One comes to you on behalf of another whose life has been full of burden and sorrow. The question is, What can be done to lighten the load and make the way easier for this person? When you were younger, you would probably have entered with earnest into the matter and have tried to help to find some less burdensome way of life for the person. You would have felt constrained to try to give him relief. For example, if money would remove the hardness of the struggle and you had money, you would have been inclined to give it that the person might have an easier course. But you are learning as you go on through life that in seeking the good of others, you must not always make their burdens less. Our burden is God’s gift to us, and God’s gift is something sacred; it has a blessing in it for us. If you were to take away your friend’s burden you would wrong him. The hard thing in his life perhaps is God’s very way of preparing him for a higher place, for nobler character, for larger usefulness. If you interfere, you may spoil God’s plan for his life.

When it is said, then, that love must always seek the good of others, the meaning is not that it must always make things easier for them. Remember that your best friend is he who makes you do what you can. It is not wise love in a

father that makes life too easy for his children. A young man has a desire to obtain an education, that he may be fitted for a certain calling or profession. He has not the means to enable him to make the necessary preparation without much struggle and long delay. Some friend wishes to help him, and proposes to advance the money that he may pursue the course of training uninterruptedly, and in as effective way as possible. Every one thinks the young man peculiarly fortunate and advises him to accept the aid. But there is a serious question whether it is a kindness or not, thus to make the way so easy for the young man. Perhaps it would have been better for him in the end if he had declined the proffered help and set out to reach the goal of his ambition by his own self-denying struggles. He would have made more of a man of himself, almost certainly, if he had won his way unaided.

We can help people most, not by doing things for them, but by inspiring them and then teaching them to do the things for themselves. Some young wives love their husbands and then in their tenderness try to restrain their earnestness and moderate their energy and hold them back from exhausting and self-denying service. It may be love, but that is not the best way to help make the man they would be proud of by and by. What a worthy man needs from his wife is inspiration, incentive, encouragement, cheer, the kindling of enthusiasm, the suggestion of high ideals, loftier visions of Christian life, impulses toward nobler attainments and sublimer achievements. "Love seeketh not its own." It seeketh the best and heavenliest for its friend and tries to encourage and stimulate him to reach it.

We may look somewhat carefully at St. Paul's description of love, as we have it in the middle verses of this wonderful little chapter. "Love suffereth long and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil; rejoiceth not in unrighteousness but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

"Love suffereth long." It is dismayed at no cost. Young people without experience are apt to think of love as all pleasure, rapture, bliss. But love oftentimes means suffering. It means service, and service means sacrifice, even unto the uttermost. We never know when we say to another, "I will be your friend," what it is going to cost us to fulfill our promise. Here is a man who promised to love his wife and to cherish her until death should separate them. That was nearly a score of years ago, and she was a radiantly beautiful bride that night. For the past twelve years and more she has been an invalid, sometimes

almost helpless, unable to do her share in the home life or to bear any burdens, herself only and always a burden, as the world would say. He carries her upstairs and downstairs, and from room to room. But through all this time his love has been faithful to its vow that wedding night. It never has failed. It is tenderer today than ever. It never has tired. Love suffereth long. It seeketh not its own.

“Love is kind.” Kindness is one of the sweetest words in the Bible. One of the great verses in the Scriptures is that in Isaiah: “The mountains may depart, and the hills be removed; but my lovingkindness shall not depart from thee.” Think of God’s loving kindness. " Love is kind." It takes a long time to learn to be really kind — for when the lesson is perfectly learned the kindness will never fail. Most of us are kind at certain times, and to certain people, but to be always kind and always kind to everybody — that is a lesson which it takes all life to learn. Yet that is what love is. That is part, too, of “seeketh not its own.” No matter how they hurt you, how they wrong you, how they pierce you with nails — love is kind, keeps on doing gentle things. Love suffereth long and is kind.

“Love envieth not.” Perhaps you have not thought of that little word, envieth. " If one really loves another," says President King, “he will begrudge him no good, but he would rather bestow more if he could.” It is easy to give way to envy when your friend is honored and you are overlooked, when people praise him and pay little heed to you. " Love envieth not." It is content to be forgotten, and loves on, desiring only to serve, to be a blessing, to do good. It seeketh not its own.

“Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.” It is humble, without self-conceit. Some people are so great in their own estimation of themselves, that they cannot see any greatness in any other. These cannot serve others. We should pray to be delivered from self-conceit. It is a heavy burden to carry with us. “Love seeketh not its own.” In honor it preferreth others, rather than self.

Love “doth not behave itself unseemly.” It is modest, reverent, humble, lowly. “Is not provoked.” Is good tempered. You cannot insult love. It does not bristle up, is not touchy. One who is irritable and gets provoked at every little thing is a great annoyance to others. They have to be always on the watch lest they hurt him or offend him in some way, he is so sensitive. A quick tempered person is a constant and painful annoyance to all about him. He is by no means pleasant to live with. Here is a man in a business firm who is so touchy, so irritable, so ready to fly into an ungovernable passion at the merest word one of his partners or business associates, or employers may say, that every one avoids him as far as

possible. This man does not know the meaning of the words, “Love seeketh not its own.”

“Love taketh not account of evil.” It is unsuspecting. It does not look for defects, does not count up the wrongs committed against it, does not imagine slights or unkindnesses, when almost certainly none were intended. Boundless is the wretchedness which one person may cause who is always looking for and finding wrong things in others. “Love seeketh not its own,” is careful not to do injustice or injury to others. “Love beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things.” It hopes that the evil report about another is not true. It is loath to believe anything bad of another. It “endureth all things.” It is patient. It never says, “I cannot bear this treatment any longer.” It forgives, not seven times only, but seventy times seven. It never thinks of self. “Love seeketh not its own.”

The problem of Christian living is to keep love in the heart, year after year, even though bearing wrong and injustice continually. That was the way Jesus did. His enemies reviled him, denied him, mocked him, betrayed him, but he loved on and never grew bitter. His heart was as gentle at the last as it was at the beginning. No matter how men hurt him, the wound healed itself instantly. That is the problem of love with us. “Love endureth all things,” “never faileth.” “For fifteen years,” one said, “I have had to bear daily outbursts of anger, with abusive words and unkind accusations, in my home; must I go on keeping sweet just as if I received only sweetness?” Well, that was Christ’s way. That is what love means.

Thus all this wonderful description of love centers in the one quality — Love “seeketh not its own.” It does seek, instead, the good, the joy, the benefit of the other, of any others, of all others. Self is hidden, overlooked, put out of sight, dead, and the whole aim of life is to do good to the other, to please him, to advance his honor, to add to the beauty of his character, and to promote his true advantage.

This is a most delicate test of life. Of whom do we think first in deciding that we will, or will not do a certain thing — of ourselves or of others? Love does not ask, “What is in it for me? Will it benefit me? Will it bring me gain? Will it make me happy?” Instead of this, it asks, “Will this be a blessing to others? Will it impart happiness to them? Will it give comfort and enrichment of life?” “Love seeketh not its own.”

Take a somewhat wider view of the lesson. It is not to be confined merely to the few people with whom we form personal friendships. It is the only rule for such relationships. There can be no real friendships of which this is not the basis.

If we think of a friendship only for what it will mean to us, what help it will give to us, what pleasure we shall get out of it, we are debasing holy things. We must put it the other way and ask what we can make it mean to the person to whom we are seeking to be a friend. Then we are looking at it in the Christlike way “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life.” That which makes so much that is called friendship empty, a mere name, is because people reverse all this and seek to be ministered unto by those whom they take into their lives. They expect to be served, and when the service ceases, when they themselves are required to serve and make sacrifices, bear burdens, endure sufferings, they grow impatient and weary of the bond which they have been calling friendship.

The lesson applies in the widest sense. As followers of Christ we must have love that “seeketh not its own” in all our living. It was thus that Christ himself loved. The people had never seen such a friend as he was to them. Other men lived for themselves. They cared nothing for any one who could be of no use to them. They despised the poor. They gave no thought to the lowly. Then Jesus came and he cared for people regardless of their condition. He sympathized with them in their distresses. He had compassion upon them in their needs. He went among them with all tenderness and gentleness. He turned away from none. The man who needed him was the man he wanted to see. Even the loathsome leper found in him a friend with sympathy. The home with suffering in it was the home to which he went most eagerly. It was a strange revealing which the people found in Jesus. The world had never seen a life like his before. He did not seek his own — he was the friend of men, of every man. He sought to lift up the fallen. He saw something beautiful, at least he saw the possibilities of beauty, in the most depraved life, and sought to find these possibilities and bring them out.

We know the way Christ lived and the way he loved. The cross was the end, but the cross meant love. The Good Shepherd gave his life for his sheep. We think of Christ as our Redeemer, and so he was. He died for us. And that is the only meaning some people see in the life and death of Jesus. But there is another meaning. He would lead us, too, into a life and a love just like his own. We must learn to love as he did. We must forget self, and seek not our own — just as he did. We are Christians only so far as we have his love in our lives. He saved his life by losing it, and there is no other way we can save our lives, but by losing them.

There is a beautiful story of two boys in Switzerland. The mother from her window watched them crossing the frozen lake close to their home, to go to their

father, who was working on the other side. They went swiftly till they came to a crack in the ice. The older boy leaped over easily, but the younger was afraid and stopped. Then the mother saw the taller boy lie down on the ice, making a bridge with his body over the break, and then she saw the little one creep over on this human bridge in safety to the other side, and saw both boys then hurry on to their father.

This illustrates what Jesus did for the world. There was an impassable chasm between earth and heaven, between men and God, and Jesus made a way by which all who will can cross that chasm. He said "I am the way ... no one cometh unto the Father but by me." He made a bridge of his own life, laying himself down across it that others might pass over on him to God's eternal life. Love in him sought not its own. He gave himself that others might be saved.

We understand this of Christ and what he has done for us, and we praise him for his wonderful love and redemption. But we should not forget that we are to be bridges too and that men are to pass over on us from sin to salvation, from sorrow to joy, from need to comfort, from death to life. We must be in the world as Jesus was — a friend of men and women and children. We that are strong should help the weak. It is well to build our great churches and have our glad services. It is well to rejoice in our privileges, our prayers, our holy communions, our love-feasts. Peter was so happy in the glory of the Transfiguration Mount that he wanted to twine boughs and build booths and stay there. But meanwhile sin, sorrow, and need waited below, at the foot of the mountain. They might not stay in the glory. We sometimes say we wish we could abide in our sweet fellowship here, and not go back any more to the world. But that is not the meaning of our spiritual life. This is not heaven yet.

We are on the earth to repeat the love of Christ wherever we go. Our hands are his hands, our lips are his lips. We are to have compassion, Christ's compassion, upon people who are living in sin. We are in his place to lift up those who have fallen. We are to be the way to God for those who cannot get to him. We are to lay ourselves down that others may cross over on us from weakness to strength, from defeat and failure to victory and blessedness, from fear to hope. Until Christian men begin to love people in this way, they have not learned what it is to be followers of Christ. That is part of the meaning of the words, "Love seeketh not its own."

Do we really love people? Do we love them in any small degree as Christ loved them? "As I have loved you, that ye also love one another" — is the measure of the love he would have us bear to all. Is it true of our love that "it

seeketh not its own?" In his recent book, "The Friendly Life," Henry F. Cope says: "Men towards men are more brutal than are the brutes. Seeking their feed boxes and hayracks, they care not on whom they trample. Our factories, our streets, all our complex life, is like that scene at Bethesda — it is a good and hopeful and energizing place for the strong, a sad, hard one for the weak. But into the scenes of selfish strife there comes another presence, that of the lover of men, one filled with a passion for people, who does not despise the failure, who forgets that the beggar is dirty and decrepit, unwholesome and repulsive, who remembers only that he is a man and in need, who sees only the opportunity to serve. He is the great helper. His heart goes out to the helpless. He is the world's great teacher, of humanity. He is the high priest at the eternal altar of sacrifice."

Christ came to save the world. He would save it by love. He loved and gave himself. Now he would have us love and give ourselves. In no other way can his love get to the lives that need its blessing. Some one has said, "The greatest thing a man can do for his heavenly Father is to be kind to some of the Father's other children." To love others as Christ loved is the highest service we can render to any one. We should pray God to teach us this love that seeketh not its own. Only God can teach it to us. We cannot learn it in the high schools or colleges or universities, nor even in the theological seminaries. We can learn it only from the great divine Teacher himself. We can get this love only down from heaven. It is not of any earthly origin. It was born into the world the night that Jesus was born at Bethlehem. It can come into our heart and life only by being born again into us. We must have Christ himself in us, and then we shall love, then we shall cease to seek our own, then self shall die out of our hearts and love shall fill us and rule in us.

We should practice the lesson, for only thus can we realize its possibilities. We know it in a way as a lesson, we can recite it fairly; now let us practice it. We talk about practicing the presence of God, making it a familiar reality in this way. We talk about practicing immortality, — training ourselves to live the immortal life in our earthly relations. Let us also practice love. You can conceive of a person knowing music perfectly as a science, and yet not being able to sing or play the simplest song. You can conceive of one knowing all the principles and all the rules of art, and yet not being able to draw the simplest sketch or paint the smallest picture. So you can conceive of one knowing all about love as a theory, all the science of love, all that Jesus taught, all that St. Paul taught, and yet not having in his life the simplest beginnings of love.

We have been thinking of some of the forms and requirements of love. Love suffereth long and is kind; love envieth not, love doth not behave itself unseemly, thinketh no evil, seeketh not its own, beareth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

We know our lesson quite well; now let us go out and practice it.

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May God bless you and keep you, help you, defend you, and lead you to know the depth of His love. *Amen*

Benediction

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,

To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. –Jude 1:24-25

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