

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT IF I CANNOT LOVE? WHAT IF I CANNOT TRUST GOD?

Let us take the central promise of the Gospel: the love-command. As is the case often, it does not appear to be a promise, but in due course it will be shown how that is what it really is.

In my annual retreat I confront some of my negative relationships. I may enter the retreat feeling quite justified in the way I am dealing with everybody. I may have a sense of myself as a basically cooperative person, for the most part sensitive to the needs of others. Perhaps the director suggests that I apply the love-command to one particular relationship. Let's imagine a typical problem. A new person came to live in the community. I went out of my way to be friendly, and I was ignored. But I was able to persist, and I still do. However, the person still treats me with a certain contempt. I have never allowed that to lead to resentment or to revenge.

"Do you love that person?" Well, yes, I do. I am still keeping myself open and doing my best to show that I would welcome his friendship. "Do you love that person as Christ loves you?" Well. . . . "Do you have any affection for him?" Must I have affection for him? Must I have affection for everybody?



We enter into a great debate. What did Jesus mean by the love-command? And it can get very complicated, as if we were studying the highly technical language of some abstruse philosopher. We cannot accept the words at face value. So we seek to translate them into something more acceptable. We draw out of the word "love" most of its meaning. We extract all the "liking" out of "love." "I must love him, but I don't have to like him." The love Jesus commanded us becomes a cold, affectionless relating.

We suffer the consequences of this decision—to separate loving and liking. We end up with a "Yes, God loves me" that has little value in it. As if God were to say to you: "Yes, I love you. I don't like you, no. But I do love you." As if the love Jesus has for me is affectionless.

I will develop this question of what Jesus meant at greater length in a later chapter, but for now I would like to continue with the illustration of the consequences of God's promises in our life.

So God says: love him as I love you. And we defend ourselves against it by trying to translate it into his telling us to do what we are pretty much already doing. We minimize the command. We neutralize it. We see the situation as one where I can wait for the other to wake up to Gospel values.

What if we accept the love-command literally. I must have real affection for him—just as Christ has for me. He is my enemy, a person who is being unfair to me, and the love-command holds out an image of me filled with affection for him. What would it be like if I really loved him? The Gospel invites me to spend time with God's will, God's desire. God sees us both as children of His. He sees our lovelessness, and He knows how unhappy it makes us. He gazes on each of us with affectionate mercy. And He wants me to share His experience. So He projects into my imagination a new me, a me who has affection for this fellow, a me who isn't yet present, who is still in the future.

What would I be like? If I have real affection for someone, it is amazing how much I can take from him, how much unfairness I can endure. Let us say that this new member of the community is actually a younger brother of yours, a blood brother. Even as a child, he was always making enemies by his exclusiveness; and it hurt to see him isolated and lonely. He has been, then, a source of pain and worry in the past. You were delighted when he entered the community. What sadness, though, when you found him again showing himself so unfriendly! But notice: there is no thought of anger or revenge or resentment, just an everlasting pity for him and for all of us and our suicidal ways. An awareness of his pain fills your consciousness. Your own pain is peripheralized. That is love. "I didn't want him transferred to Cincinnati where I could forget him. No. I want him here—even though he causes me pain."

That is the image of myself that Jesus suggests to me, an image of a me filled with unyielding affection. It is a me-clothed-with-Jesus. That was Jesus—unyielding in his affection. That is God, pursuing me even when I return no love to Him. It is a new me, the me that God had in mind when He created me. He wanted to make a new, unheard-of spender—a me-filled-with-love. By this loving I will become like Him. My enemy becomes a peculiar moment in my life, where I am invited into the fullness of reality.

What, then, if I did love him like that! All would be so different. I would have an enthusiasm for dealing with him, instead of an instinct to avoid him. What a contrast that would be to the way I do relate to him. And now I begin to see that my present state is not love at all. Loving him like a lonely blood brother—that is what love is. Love is the mother's heart expanding to embrace the weakness of her weakest child, a persistence in going-out to the most rejecting of her children.

So, desire is born out of dissatisfaction. My present state is revealed to me for what it really is—lovelessness. And I want to become a truly loving person.

I get to work at it. I keep reminding myself of the love-command. I stir myself up to kind, affectionate deeds. I can try to see Christ in him. This often results in making the other person very nervous. It can be a trying time for everyone concerned, and it can go on for years. By my repeated efforts and reminders I can persuade myself that I do love him. It is painful not to be loved, but most painful is it when the person who doesn't love you thinks he does. This basic dishonesty leaves the door open to manipulation and a likely confrontation.

But if I can be led by the Lord into the truth, then after a while I will see that I do not love him. All my efforts have not produced any real affection. I have tried and tried, but there's no real warmth. I sowed love where there was no love, but I did not get love back! And I am back where I started. I made a mistake, perhaps.

Two spirits enter. One: I was better off before I got on this "affection kick." I let myself get raised up to consider new possibilities of life, and now I must return to the real world.

And the other spirit: ask, and you shall receive. Into the despair we experience at our inability to love, comes the good news. What does the believer believe that makes his life so different from that of the nonbeliever? What is that fundamental article of faith? The Resurrection? The Trinity? The Incarnation? Not these but this: "that the power to love will be given to him when he asks for it. For that is the believing in Christ which the Apostle urges—'a faith which works through loving' " (St. Augustine).⁴

Then, St. Augustine spells out with precision the nature of all effective spiritual activity. "What you do not yet have in the area of loving, ask for so that you may receive it. For faith asks what the law commands: without the gift of God, without the Holy Spirit through whom charity is poured into our hearts, the law can order us but it cannot help us."

At that moment of despair, when I have exhausted my own

energies, and spelled out my own helplessness, at that precious moment only, can I hear the good news: ask. Stop pretending to love. Stop acting as if you did love. Enter honestly and persistently into your lovelessness and your reluctance to love, and turn to the Lord, your deliverer. For you are at that most blessed spot where God can touch you. God gazes on your enemy with everlasting affection. He wants you to share that. That is what Jesus' life was about—God sharing with us His power to love, His spirit.

But we place upon ourselves a yoke of fulfilling the commands on our own. It is easier for us to believe that God wants us to get at it, and go to work on it. Our focus narrows to our sincere efforts. And God is left out, His will, His power. While we may verbally mention Him, we effectively expect nothing from Him. We see Him as a bystander urging us to stretch ourselves more.

We live as if there were no good news. We live as if we had never heard of the Holy Spirit. Instead of being my deliverance, God becomes one who points out to me the path along which I must deliver myself. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" "How can you believe that the Father will not give you the Holy Spirit when you ask?" "O ye of little faith!"

This journey from hearing the love command to hearing the invitation to ask for its fulfillment is a journey God is constantly drawing us along. It is not that we hear the love command only in the beginning of spiritual growth, and hearing the invitation to ask is the summit of years of traveling. No, these events are taking place all the time. God is always promising a much more loving future even to saints, and His invitation to look to Him and ask is heard even by beginners. This is the way God is always relating to each of us.

Notice, too, that the love command is really a promise. By commanding us to love as Jesus loves, He lifts our eyes to an incredible future, and seeks the moment when we are ready to believe that He will give us that future for the asking.

In the faith area, a similar pattern evolves. A promise is glimpsed, "No one who follows me ever walks in the darkness." We are told of a life so filled with faith as to be free from worry, from anxiety. "Do not be troubled." Again it can appear in a command-form.

Perhaps it will come to us as: what if I were to really start believing! To get an image of what faith would be like, imagine this scene. We come back late from a meeting—seven of us. We had to miss the crucial varsity football game. But it was on TV, and a friend was asked to videotape it. We deliberately avoid finding out the score. When we go to the rec room, there it is, all set for use. I go out for some popcorn, but I run into a member of the community who is unaware of the arrangement. The first thing he says, eyes aglow: "That should put us in the top 10!"

I go back with the popcorn. I decide to watch anyway. We fall behind right away. It's 14-0 at the quarter. At the half, after three horrible fumbles, it's 31-0! We stop for a few minutes. Everyone is watching the same data, but our experiences are so different. Two of them want to leave and go to bed. They'll stay just to see how the second half starts. Everyone is depressed. But not you. You are eager to see what will have to be a sensational second half.

That is how faith operates. The believer *knows* because the God who knows tells him so. The believer has only the same evidence as everyone else. But he has heard a witness, and he has believed the word of that witness. What if Jesus is right and our anxiety arises from illusion, a basically false picture of what is happening. I am everlastingly anxious because I am caught up in superficial data.

It is only natural to defend myself against the image of real faith. We minimize it. We justify our anxieties. We see the command as exaggerated, and we translate it to mean: don't be overanxious. In other words, try to be somewhat less anxious.

But if I let God's vision of me and His will to transform me enter into my consciousness, I am revealed as an unbeliever.

This can be very frightening. It can make my way of life appear to be meaningless. It calls for great courage to be honest about the shallowness of my faith.

Once we let in the promises of what faith could be like, we experience dissatisfaction and desire. Why should I go through life unbelieving! A desire comes to deepen my faith in God. I rouse myself up to be free from anxiety. I will trust from here on out. And I set out on a path of redoubled efforts to reduce the anxiety in my life. Often certain texts become the instruments of this campaign. I print them up and put them where I will be constantly reminded of His providence. A form of self-hypnosis is used. At worst it will appear to work, and I will have a sense of believing. I will feel myself in the grip of a deepening faith. It will be enjoyable to note my growth.

At best, it will fall apart soon. I will see myself as falling short—as others see me. I will notice a persistent stumbling in faith. I will see myself caught by an imbedded anxiety, my days dominated by anxious moods. Only in the early morning or late evening will I find myself free. Unfaith will be seen as me. An incapacity to believe will surface. True believing will be a world I hear about, but one quite alien to my experience. I will see that nothing I did or can do will really change me.

At that moment various suggestions will come. "Return to what your life was before you got caught up in this unrealistic view of faith." "Come back to earth. You are not a saint." "God just wants you to do the best you can."

There will also come the invitation to ask, and to receive as a gift that deeper faith I was so intent on building. God presses into my consciousness a suggestion that my life could be so much more filled with faith and joy precisely because He has that level of living in His hands as a gift for me. He had a new creation in mind when He made me—a 'me-clothed-with-Jesus'—faith. And He is restless until I let Him gift me with it.

Notice again how this evolution from God's holding out to us a promise of a much richer life up to when He invites us to ask

for it—all this is not divided into a part for beginners and a part for the “perfect.” Even with the saints, God is entering their life as a promise of what they could be, a promise which makes them dissatisfied and desirous. Even to beginners God is able to speak His words, inviting them to trust in His power to transform them, and not to focus their attention on their own efforts. This is what God is engaged in with each of us all the time.

He has seen a “you” that is still not existing, a “you” you have never imagined, a “you” clothed with faith and love, with God’s own armor, with Jesus Himself. That vision of His sets Him going, gets Him to invade our consciousness by every means—in season and out of season, He presses that vision upon us. “This can be you.” “How much you are obstructing the great things I wish to accomplish in you.”

Those great things are, substantially, a much deeper loving and sensitivity to the needs of others, and a greatly enlarged faith: a new heart within you that He knows will make you a gospel-invitation to all you meet, an invitation He knows they badly need.

Through dissatisfaction, desire, and despair, the Lord leads you to a most intimate union with Him. A union of hearts where what concerns Him so much begins to concern you more and more. You get to know Him, to know what He’s up to, and what He is wanting to do with you. You come to share the divine consciousness.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE THREE CONDITIONS OF EFFECTIVE ASKING

Jesus puts great emphasis on asking. He makes it sound so simple. Just ask, and you will get. Our own past, our experiences in prayer may be teaching us a very different message: asking does not deliver. As often as not, nothing happens. And we are led to believe that asking has to be accompanied by something else if it’s going to be effective.

Commonly we add on penances, if it’s a favor we want badly. Or we feel that prayer, to be effective, must be part of a steady, faithful spiritual life, and that if we are not generous with God, He will not be generous with us. Neither of these is true, of course, but it is easy to fall into such false convictions.

We minimize the promise contained in Jesus’ words. “What that really means is . . .,” and we end up with something that pays only lip-service to Jesus’ bold promise. “He can’t mean . . .” But he does. Asking is our role. No payment is demanded.

Why, then, don’t we receive when we ask? There are, of course, gifts that may harm us, that will not be a part of His will. But what of those fundamental gospel gifts that God is always wanting to increase in us: why don’t we receive them when we ask? Why does God not give the good Spirit to those who ask?

What we are going to discuss here is the very nature of effective asking. There are three essential elements in effective

asking. Without them the asking is a pretense, and not a real asking.

Let's begin with the need for real desire when we ask. What if I go to prayer and I ask, but I have no real desire for it? Well, why would I ever ask for something I don't want? Because the gospels tell me to ask, and I want to do the right thing. I've been told to ask, so I do. It's an easy step to take. But wait a moment! Why would anyone ever *not* desire the gift of the Holy Spirit? Can't we take for granted that we do want the Holy Spirit?

What is this Holy Spirit? In human life, the Spirit is the power to love someone whom we do not love, whom we judge, or feel resentful toward. Do we want the coming of love? It may be a threatening future. "If I get a real love for Charles, I'm going to have to be nice to him, forgive him and forget the books he has borrowed and never returned, and let him back into my friendship and I know he will start to take advantage of me again." I may not really want that. I know that once I start being friendly again, Carlotta will start stepping all over me. The gift of love can frighten us. We can suspect that beneath it there will surely be the cross. We suspect, very naturally, that any coming of God to me will be a purification, a crucifixion. Handing myself over to the workings of love may appear to be pure foolishness.

As a result of my fear, my desire for the coming of the Spirit will be shallow. But I may ask anyway, knowing that asking for the Spirit is what prayer should be.

What happens to such prayer? What can God do? Can He force His Spirit on someone who has no desire for it? Not at all. Like all the higher gifts, like friendship itself, which it is a form of, the Spirit cannot be forced on anyone. God's desire is blocked. So, one of the essential elements of asking is the desire for what I ask. It is pointless to ask for something I do not really want.

A second essential to effective asking is the awareness of my need for the gift. If I come to prayer and ask for what I feel I

already have, the asking will be meaningless, and have no effect. It would be a pretense, a routine I am submitting myself to without any reality in it. Why would a person bother asking for something he feels he already has? Once again, a sense that I *should* be asking can lead to this.

Take this instance: I am not getting on well with Edgar. I do love him, but he has ways of doing things that are unfair; and I do not love those ways. This has made our relationship somewhat unpleasant. Instead of telling him plainly, "When you are not using the car, the keys belong on the board," I am too reserved, and I just put up with it. I feel I should confront him, but I hesitate. My spiritual director tells me to pray for a deeper love. So I do. But I know that is not the solution because I already do love Edgar. It's what *he's* doing that is the problem. Any time I spend asking to love Edgar is pure waste. It's a pretense, a mockery of what Jesus meant.

Without an awareness that I need love, asking for love is perfectly ineffective. Unless I see my need for faith, asking for faith is idle. The Lord who is wanting to fill me with a deeper loving and a more intense believing is blocked.

So, for asking to be effective as Jesus wishes, we must be asking for something we really want and something we know we do not have.

The third essential element in asking is an attitude of expectation.

If I go into prayer and ask God for His gifts, but I honestly don't expect to get them, such asking is futile. In order to give us what He wants, the Lord needs to find us asking with great expectations. Effective asking calls for a taking for granted that God wants to give me this, and can do so. Without that confidence, the prayer is going nowhere. This is a most common problem: we do ask, but we expect nothing. And because we expect nothing, nothing comes; and soon we stop asking. Our prayer can become an effort to settle peacefully for whatever it is that's actually happening anyway and a giving up on any

hope that God will actually do anything, will enter and transform my heart, in a way so intensely active it is called a new creation.

Jesus encountered this problem constantly, and repeatedly addressed himself to it. Real faith is a rare commodity in his life, occurring in some surprising places, and not being present where he had expected it. A Jew says, "If you can . . ."; and a pagan says, "Only say the word . . ." (Mark 9:22-23; Matt 8:8).

Why is it that expectation is necessary for the receiving of God's gifts when this is not paralleled in the human scene where we can be surprised by a gift we never expected?

Even in the human scene, the higher gifts require our expecting another to act, our waiting on another's choosing. Even love is not a looking to our own will, but a depending on another's, a letting the other choose. If we try to guarantee it, we will destroy it, and at best receive a substitute of real love.

But an example may help indicate how desire and faith are essential to effective asking. I need a ride to the airport. The plane leaves at noon. I plan to go to the airport by subway and to start at 8:00. You hear about it and you come to offer to drive me. We can leave at 10:00. Well, I do not really desire to spend that time with you. You bore me. "No thanks: I'm meeting someone at the subway." If I do not desire the favor, you cannot give it.

But what if I do desire. I'm delighted at the favor. But in the morning I start wondering: "What if he doesn't come? It will be too late to go by subway and I'll have to take a later plane, and that's impossible." I go back and forth. Finally I opt for safety, and I take the subway and have someone call you. I wanted it, but I didn't expect it. I suspected you might be late. And my lack of expectation blocked your favor.

God's desire to share His gifts is blocked when He encounters a false asking—an asking without desire, or without expectation, or without any sense of need for the gift. So, much of our asking is routine and, in a way, without hope, hesitant. The

Didache teaches that to ask hesitatingly is to receive nothing. Christ urges us to take for granted that God responds, simply to refuse to entertain any doubts about His desire to give and His power.

Often we pray convinced that we have confidence and desire. We tell God how deep is our desire for the gifts. We would do better to listen to Him on whether our desire is deep or quite shallow. We would do better to let Him tell us of His opinion. Often we feel our desire is deep, but we are in contact with a superficial feeling only. As He sees our inner depths, God can see how shallow is our desire compared to what it could be, to what He would wish to make it through His gift. Has He not Himself a profound desire to give, a desire so deep it is to the shedding of blood? Now that is deep desire. When we pray, it would be much more effective if we were in touch with the depth of His desire to give and how that overshadows our desire to receive. Does He not wish to give us a share in Jesus' own desire to receive at the hands of the Father? Is any desire of ours deep in comparison with that? Yet that is where He wants to lead us through His gifts.

What if I do not have a deep desire, is it worthwhile to pray? Of course. Prayer is the path along which desire comes. "Lord, I don't want to forgive her." "Do you wish that you did want, or are you just as glad that you don't want?" On that willingness to be changed into a person of deep desire, the Lord can move. It is the desire for the desire that St. Ignatius mentioned. Some writers talk as if in prayer we need bring "nothing but desire." But even that can be given to us by God's transforming us. Desire in us is a share, a small share of the desire He has been wanting to fill our hearts with. St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that the coming of the fervor of desire is the goal of prayer, not a predisposition.

What if I come to prayer and I have no sense of God's desire to grace me and His power to do that? Is that prayer useless? If I were to start asking for what I don't really expect, it would be

useless. But there is a way of praying at that time which is effective. I may become aware of how shallow or even nonexistent are my expectations, how disheartened I am. The Lord, too, can reveal to me at what a superficial level of expecting I live, how far I am from expecting the way Jesus expected the Father to sustain him and fill him with all he needed. I see myself in the grip of an illusion, a despair-filled illusion of God's powerlessness or indifference. Whatever the reason is, I feel that nothing will come but what I put in.

Jesus led the father of the possessed boy into effective prayer: from "Heal my son," which the man did not expect to happen, to "Help my unbelief." It is the only effective prayer at such moments. It puts us in harmony with God as He relates to us in our great need for faith. He does not need our affirmations of faith, our assurances to Him of how deeply we believe. He does need our honesty. He needs us to let Him reveal how shallow is our faith, how badly we stand in need of His gift of faith, how atheistic is our mood, our lack of expecting.

What if in prayer I never ask for love or faith. That would be strange. My God is desirous most of all of clothing me, and I never think of His desire, of what He comes to prayer to do, what He has in mind for me. Not that this asking has to be verbal. No. But for prayer to be effective there must be present in my consciousness an awareness of my needs especially in loving and believing, and a desire and a trust in His will for me and His power to fill those needs. Any prayer which lacks one of these elements is not true prayer. It is an ignoring of God's desire.

The saints experience great consolation in prayer, overwhelmed at the riches of His desire and at the shallowness of their own. The exaltation that is the Lord's doing is not based on some flattering self-image, but on an honesty, a humiliation, a compunction—that is the word used for centuries to describe the first part of prayer, our part: to stand before Him in all my poverty, and to be filled with awe at His goodness. I am poor in

loving, and in believing, and in wanting to love, and in expecting Him to save me, and poor even in awareness of my poverty. That is the consciousness which the Lord floods with consolation.

The awareness of our poverty in spiritual areas is the central focus of our spiritual activity. It has to be worked on. It cannot be presumed to be there. Operating against this honesty are natural mechanisms within us that propel us to distort our self-image in a flattering way. These mechanisms are very powerful, and their working has been described by psychologists as well as spiritual writers. They operate instinctively and without much awareness on our part; we develop an image of ourselves inflated with righteousness. "At least, I can say I tried." "I did my best, no more can be expected."

To counteract them, we need a spiritual life, a program of spiritual choices, even a prayer life. We shall get into greater detail on this in a later chapter.