

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM - PART III

“Let's Try The Thing We Haven't Tried”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

I Cor. 13

On June 10, 1951, Lucille and I were in Stuttgart, Germany, a city which was little more than a shadow of its once great former self. Almost any direction one chose to look, there was nothing but rubble. Miles and miles of rubble. The gaunt, ghastly aftermath of war.

It was our last day of our two weeks of ministry in Germany and, at the invitation of the local representative of the Baptist World Alliance Relief Committee, I was invited to pay a visit to one of the large relocation centers for the “Volk Deuche.” These were the people of German origin living in countries outside of Germany who were about to be captured by Russia and, for reasons of safety, fled back into Germany. Here, in these relocation centers, they were trying to make some semblance of a life for themselves and their children.

It was a deeply moving experience to see a community of many thousands of people living in little hovels made out of debris from the ruined buildings of Stuttgart. Materials you and I would have thoughtlessly thrown away. For the most part they consisted of one room. None of the windows had glass in them. They were covered with cardboard or cloth curtains to help keep out the bitter wind and cold. All of them had dirt floors. One of the most vivid memories I carry to this day was the amazing way those poor German women made even the dirt floors seem clean.

Sometimes there were two or three families living in a room 10' by 12'. Even so, there seemed to be a genuine sense of gratitude for that meager standard of living.

I was introduced to the president of this little community, a middle-aged German whose countenance bore the deep lines of tragedy. Through a German Baptist girl, who was acting as my interpreter, I asked him how things were going. He said, “Much better, thank you, much better. Now when my little children are hungry and ask me for bread, I have bread to give them.”

While the B.W.A. Representative and interpreter were going about the community trying to find the families in greatest need so they could offer them some relief, I just wandered up and down the winding little streets, trying to fill my mind with impressions of the effect of man's inhumanity to man, impressions which I hope to God I never forget.

As I turned a corner I came upon a little nursery school, organized and operated by an American Christian missionary. Here she took care of the tiny children whose fathers were either dead or missing in action, and whose mothers had to work to provide a living. I had a bag of little candies which had been given to us the last day we were in Sweden by some of our friends because they knew candy would be hard to get in Germany. I began to give each child one of the candies. The girls would curtsy. The boys would bow. Each said, “Danke. Danke schoen.” (Thanks. Thank you). One little boy dropped his piece of candy as I handed it to him. Almost automatically I reached into the bag for another piece but, quick as a flash, he stooped down, picked it up with a fist full of dirt and popped it into his mouth. It was the first candy he had ever seen and he didn't mind a little dirt.

One little girl stood apart from the others. When I offered her the candy, she wouldn't take it. I couldn't speak German, so I motioned for the director of the nursery school to come over. I asked her if she would ask the little girl if she wanted candy. She said something in German to the child and turned, looked at me and said, “No.” I replied, “Would you ask her if there is anything I can give her?” Again the teacher spoke to the child in German. The little girl looked directly into my eyes and said something to her. The woman stared up at me with that blank expression which we have upon our faces when we cannot find words to say what we feel. Then she got down on her knees beside the sandbox, drew the little girl close to her heart, looked up at me with quivering lips and answered, “She said, ‘Will you love me?’”.

Just four words. Yet, with childlike directness and simplicity, she summed up the deepest longing of every human heart, “Will you love me?”

As I turned away, too filled with emotion to say or do anything except wipe away a tear, it seemed as though the sweet innocence of her doll-like countenance, the heart-rending pathos of her plea, mounted in intensity until they became the face of every person on this planet. The voice of everyone who ever lived, crying out like rolling claps of thunder, “Will you love me? Love me? Love me?”

“The world is dying
For a little bit of love.
Everywhere men are crying
For a little bit of love.
For the love that rights the wrong,
For the love that brings a song.
They have waited, oh so long,
For a little bit of love.”

Victor Hugo once said, “The supreme happiness in life is the conviction that we are loved.” And after earning my degree in psychology and spending nine years counseling many people, I can say I have yet to meet a truly unhappy person who down deep inside himself was sure he was loved.

Now while love is a mysterious imponderable, it is not impersonal. There is no such thing as love in the abstract. In order to have love there must be a giver and a receiver. Dr. Warner Cole, of the Covenant Baptist Church of Detroit, puts it this way, “Love is always directional. It is always on the move. It is going somewhere, towards somebody, or something. Love is ever functional. It is continually accomplishing something, engaged in some good undertaking, dedicated to some helpful ministry or work. Love is always objective. It is no wandering star of the universe of confusion. It is God's great guided missile, making its way toward some person, some nation, some goal, unerringly hurrying on toward the object of its errand.”

How strange then that we should be afraid of love. And yet, admit it or not, far too many of us are captives of what Chesterton called “the meanest fear of all, the fear of love”.

We are so afraid people will think we're sentimental. We're so afraid they will see in our emotionalism a sign of weakness. And so, to paraphrase Ardis Whitman, we laugh when we want to cry. We say, “Gee, thanks,” when we mean “God bless you.” And “I'll be seein' you,” when we mean, “I'll miss you so very much.” We pretend to be sophisticated and aloof when down deep inside we long to express what we really feel within our heart.

And oh, how much the world needs our love. How hungry it is for a bit of affection, a gesture of approval, a word of acceptance. The piercing need of every person you meet on the street is love, freely given and freely received.

As someone has said, “Our world heeds no new weapons of mass destruction to frighten people into living at peace. We need no new scientific gadgets to remove the drudgery of everyday tasks. We need no new philosophers to bring us meaning out of what seems sometimes to be a meaningless existence. What we really need is love.” As Smiley Blanton says in his book by the same name, we must Love Or Perish.

Well, Let's Try The Thing We Haven't Tried. Let's try love!

We've tried bombs and bullets.

We've tried threats of mass destructive retaliation.

We've tried economic reprisal and political isolationism.

We've tried the Creed of the Club.

The philosophy of the fist.

The doctrine of the rolling pin.

We've tried everything but love. Why not try the one thing we haven't tried.

Let's Try It In Our Homes

Two weeks ago I said marriage isn't easy. It means the blending of two personalities with differing backgrounds, interests, training, and environment into one.

This week I came across a story told by Judge Philip B. Gilliam which illustrates that poignantly. He says, “There were three men looking at the Grand Canyon. One was a minister, one was an artist and one was a cowboy. The minister looked at the Grand Canyon and said, ‘What a wonderful work God has created.’ The artist looked at the Grand Canyon and said, ‘What beautiful coloring. I'd love to paint it.’ The cowboy looked at the Grand Canyon and said, ‘What a lousy place to lose a cow!’”

Well, there's something in that simple story which can help each one of us in our home relationships. We need to remember we come together as two individuals with different backgrounds, different ideas, different training, and we will see life in the light of our differences. There is always only one catalyst which can hold us together. It is the catalyst of love.

I have never yet seen a home deteriorate because it was the recipient of too much love. I have never seen a child become delinquent because her parents gave her too much love. I have never talked to a husband or wife whose hopeful dreams of a happy home were shattered because their partner gave them too much love. But I have seen many a child, many a parent, many a husband and wife, whose life had been utterly destroyed for want of love.

There's so much magic in the words, “I love you” when they are truly and honestly said. During the last week of our vacation, Lucille and I reached one of those impasses I think are pretty normal in any healthy home. One, or both, of us had gotten up on the wrong side of the bed that morning and, for some reason or other which I don't even remember now, both of us had become very angry.

She sulked over the sink and started doing the breakfast dishes. I went out on the screened porch in a sullen mood and started planning a speech in which I would really tell her off. Then I

remembered that on a Sunday in October I was going to preach a sermon on the healing power of love. A voice within me said, “John Lavender, if love won't work in a moment like this, then it won't work. Periods!” So I swallowed my pride, went into the kitchen, put my arms around her and said, “Darling, I love you.” She took her hands out of the dish water, turned around, gave me a rather wet hug and said softly, “I love you, too.” What started out to be a cloudy day was suddenly filled with warmth and sunlight.

Now don't give me all the credit. There have been many other times when she has taken the initiative and, by trying the thing I wasn't willing to try, has bridged the chasm between us. I know many of you have, in your homes, experienced the miracle healing power of love. But there may be others who have grimly held on to some real or imagined slight, some small or exaggerated hurt, and through pride have erected a barrier between you which has made everyone involved miserable and unhappy.

Why not Try The Thing You Haven't Tried? Why not try love? And discover the magical way it melts the differences between you and strengthens the ties which bind you. Yes, Let's Try The Thing We Haven't Tried in our homes. And then --

Let's Try It In Our Daily Relationships.

Paul Davies, one of the great Episcopalian preachers, says, “We are all alone under the stars...all strangers and sojourners here on Earth.” And he is right. All of us are just a little bewildered by the complexity of life. A little burdened by the weight of the load we are asked to carry. A little weary of life's taxations. And what we often need is just the love and understanding of an honest friend.

I have a great deal of sympathy for the little boy who said, while moping around the house one day, “I've got only one friend and I hate him.” Well, you see, life must be lived in relationships and those relationships will be so much happier and pleasant if we recognize that the fellow who rides the commuter train with us, the lady who lives across the back fence, the boy who sits across

the aisle in school, the woman who works at the next desk, is just as much in need of love as we are. And only eternity will show the accumulative effect of the quiet, often unknown, words and acts of love which have been dropped along the way.

Gary Moore, the famous comedian, tells how as a boy he stuttered terribly. He seemed to be utterly frustrated in his life-long ambition to be an actor. And then a high school drama teacher who knew stutterers are all right as long as they have some one else's words to say, encouraged him to learn the leading role in a school play. She took him under her wing and taught Gary how to speak slowly and clearly.

Today that frightened, bewildered, frustrated boy is one of America's favorite personalities, living a life of abundance by using his great talents to make people laugh and thus, for a moment, help lighten their load. Says Gary Moore, “All possible through the curing kindness of a high school teacher who really cared.”

John Carmichael, one of the leading Scotch ministers who has had a mighty influence upon his land, had a tough time of it in his first church. He was young and sensitive and often frightened. It seemed like the harder he tried the poorer he preached. He was sure he was going to be fired. One day, to his great terror, the stern elders of his Scottish church requested a meeting with him. But, when they got together, instead of criticizing him, the chief elder put his arm around him and said, “Next Sunday, before you begin to speak, we want you to say to yourself, ‘They'll all be lovin' me.’ And Son, it will be true. From the oldest to the youngest, we will be lovin' you very much.” John Carmichael, the great Scotch preacher, says that was the turning point in his life. The moment when his ministry of great influence really began. The moment he knew that he was loved.

Well, ministers are human, too. I, for one, shall never forget my first Sunday as your pastor. While sitting back in the old study before the service, filled with apprehension and wondering if I would be worthy of your trust and capable of fulfilling the great challenge you had set before me,

there was a knock at the door. John Kelin came in to say, “Young fellow, I love you and will be praying for you.” Other people had said it before and many have said it since. But I'll never forget that occasion as long as I live. It provided the courage and strength which, at that moment, I needed very much. And I find it easy to love John Kelin because he has given so much of his love to me.

We also need to love the ones we find hard to love. It's easy to love the people who help us. It is not always easy to love the people who hurt us. And yet, a love that is not good enough for everybody is not good enough for anybody!

Have you heard the latest Texas story about an easterner who landed in Dallas, was greeted by the porter with “Howdy, pahdner, let me have your bag.” The taxi driver said, “Hop in, pahdner.” The desk clerk was just as friendly, “Sign here, pahdner.” So was the bell boy. The waitress in the coffee shop said, “What'll you have pahdner?” Then he went to the desk to cash a personal check and the cashier said, “Sorry, they just took all our money to the bank, stranger”.

Well, we need to love those who need us as well as those whom we need. I know of a young minister who quite inadvertently said something to a woman in his church which offended her. I know him well enough to know he didn't mean it. But she had been hurt and the natural impulse was to hurt back. So she began to speak unkindly about him. When people told him of some of the things she had been saying, his first impulse was to go set her right. To tell her a thing or two and put her in her place. But instead of acting in anger he decided to walk the road of love.

As Starr Daily would put it, “He beamed love at her” in any number of ways. He went out of his way to be kind and, when at first he was rebuffed, he swallowed his pride and went at it again. In the end, love won. Today she is one of the dearest friends he has. The light of Christian love shines through her eyes every time she hears the mention of her pastor's name.

Oh, how much better off all of us would be if we followed the wisdom of Edwin Markham who

said:

“He drew a circle and shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;
But love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle and took him in.”

A Final Word Of Caution.

Love is not cowardice. Kindness is not softness. Meekness is not weakness. It takes real backbone, real character, real Christian strength to love. If you decide to Try The Thing We Haven't Tried, there'll be many times when you'll have to put your hand in your pocket when you'd rather punch a fellow in the nose. You'll bite your lip when the impulse is to “tell 'em off” and say to yourself, “Love suffereth long and is kind.” And believe me, that takes real courage.

As someone has said, “We must never permit love to be cheapened by popular songs and movie scripts which would reduce it to little more than erotic emotion, a kind of amorous passion on a moonlight night.”

Real love is not gshy emotionalism. It is not saying what we do not mean. Real love, like the cross, is self-giving, self-denying, self-disciplining, self-sacrificing.

I think it's pretty evident to us by now that there is no short-cut to building the Kingdom of God on earth. There is no plan for making a better world which eliminates the necessity of making it out of better people. Well, the one force which can make people better—the one lever which can lift you and me to our highest and best—is the lever of love.

So, Let's Try The Thing We Haven't Tried. Let's try love.

Let's try it in our home as the balm to heal all wounds, as the blotter to dry up all disappointments.

Let's try it in our church as the yardstick which will put into proper prospective all our imagined

slights and exaggerated hurts.

Let's try it in our world as a little candle, casting light among the shadows. As a tree whose fruit-laden branches reach across the backyard fences which divide us, to share our blessings with others.

Yes, let's try love. The thing we haven't always tried. Let's lavish it upon the people who come within the scope of our little world and then move on, so they can carry with them the sweet, dynamic, life-changing memory of the flower of love. The flower whose petal never fall. Whose color never fades. Whose fragrance never dies.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE WEEK

Your assignment for this week will be to put your Christian love to the supreme test and “beam it” at the one person who has been the cause of your greatest irritation and frustration. That may be a family member, someone with whom you work, a neighbor, or perhaps a fellow member of our church.

This is not a one week assignment! Your task will be to continue loving this person with an unfailing love, rebuffed and rejected, until love wins. This is your most difficult assignment thus far, but if you complete it, it will be your most rewarding.