

Excerpts from Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*
selected by Charles Bellinger

Works of Love (1847) [2nd Hong translation]

. . . after having told the parable of the merciful Samaritan, Christ says to the Pharisee (Luke 10:36), “Which of these three seems to you to have been the neighbor to the man who had fallen among robbers?” and the Pharisee answers *correctly*, “The one who showed mercy on him”—that is, by acknowledging your duty you easily discover who your neighbor is. The Pharisee’s answer is contained in Christ’s question, which by its form compelled the Pharisee to answer in that way. The one to whom I have a duty is my neighbor, and when I fulfill my duty I show that I am a neighbor. Christ does not speak about knowing the neighbor but about becoming a neighbor oneself, about showing oneself to be a neighbor just as the Samaritan showed it by his mercy. By this he did not show that the assaulted man was his neighbor but that he was a neighbor of the one assaulted. The Levite and the priest were in a stricter sense the victim’s neighbor, but they wished to ignore it. The Samaritan, on the other hand, who because of prejudice was predisposed to misunderstanding, nevertheless correctly understood that he was a neighbor of the assaulted man. (WL, 22)

You *shall* love—this, then, is the word of the *royal Law*. And truly, my listener, if you are capable of forming a conception of the state of the world before this word was spoken, or if you are trying to understand yourself and are paying attention to the lives and minds of those who, although they call themselves Christians, actually live within pagan conceptions, then in relation to this Christian imperative, as in relation to everything Christian, you will humbly confess with the wonder of faith that such a thing did not arise in any human being’s heart. (WL, 24)

By this *shall* love is also eternally secured *against every change*. The love that only has existence can be changed; it can be changed *within itself* and it can be changed *from itself*.

Spontaneous love can be changed within itself; it can be changed into its opposite, into *hate*. Hate is a love that has become its opposite, a love that has perished. Down in the ground the love is continually aflame, but it is the flame of hate; not until the love has burned out is the flame of hate also put out. Just as it is said of the tongue that “it is the same tongue with which we bless and curse,” so it may also be said that it is the same love that loves and hates. But just because it is the same love, for that very reason it is not in the eternal sense the true love, which remains, *unchanged, the same*, whereas that spontaneous love, when it *is changed*, is still basically *the same*. True love, which has undergone the change of eternity by becoming duty, is never changed; it is simple, it loves and never hates, never hates—the beloved. It might seem as if that spontaneous love were the stronger because it can do two things, because it can *both* love and hate. It might seem as if it had an entirely different power over its object when it says, “If you will not love me, then I will hate you”—but this is only an illusion. Is changingness indeed a stronger power than changelessness, and who is the stronger, the one who says, “If you will not love me, then I will hate you,” or the one who says, “If you hate me, I will still continue to love you”?

Certainly it is terrifying and terrible when love is changed into hate, but for whom is it actually terrible? I wonder if it is not for the one involved, the person to whom it happened that his love changed into hate! (WL, 34-35)

Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally and happily secured against despair. Spontaneous love can become unhappy, can reach the point of despair. Again it might seem to be an expression of the strength of this love that it has the power of despair, but this is mere appearance, since the power of despair, however much it is praised, is actually powerlessness; its peak is precisely its downfall. Yet this, that spontaneous love can reach the point of despair, shows that it is in despair, that even when it is happy it loves with the power of despair—loves another person “more than itself, more than God.” Of despair it must be said: Only that person can despair who is in despair. When spontaneous love despairs over misfortune, it only becomes manifest that it was in despair, that in its happiness it had also been in despair.

The despair is due to relating oneself with infinite passion to a particular something, for one can relate oneself with infinite passion—unless one is in despair—only to the eternal. Spontaneous love *is* in despair in this way, but when it becomes happy, as it is called, its being in despair is hidden from it; when it becomes unhappy, it becomes manifest that it was in despair. In contrast, the love that has undergone the change of eternity by becoming duty can never despair, simply because it *is* not in despair. That is to say, despair is not something that can happen to a person, an event such as good fortune and misfortune. Despair is a misrelation in a person’s innermost being—no fate or event can penetrate so far and so deep; it can only make manifest that the misrelation—was there. For this reason there is only one security against despair: to undergo the change of eternity through duty’s *shall*. Anyone who has not undergone this change *is* in despair. Good fortune and prosperity can hide it, but misfortune and adversity do not, as he thinks, make him despair but make it manifest that he—was in despair. If one speaks differently, it is because one frivolously confuses the highest concepts. In other words, what makes a person despair is not misfortune but his lack of the eternal. Despair is to lack the eternal; despair is not to have undergone the change of eternity through duty’s *shall*. Despair is not, therefore, the loss of the beloved—that is unhappiness, pain, suffering—but despair is the lack of the eternal. (WL, 40-41)

If anyone thinks that by falling in love or by finding a friend a person has learned Christian love, he is in profound error. No, if someone is in love and in such a way that the poet would say of him, “He is really in love,” well, then the love commandment, when it is said to him, can be changed a bit and yet say the same thing. The love commandment can say to him: Love your neighbor as you love the beloved. But does he not love the beloved *as himself*, as the commandment that speaks of the neighbor commands? Certainly he does, but the beloved he loves *as himself* is not the neighbor; the beloved is the *other I*. Whether we speak of the *first I* or of the *other I*, we do not come a step closer to the neighbor, because the neighbor is the *first you*. The one whom self-love, in the strictest sense, loves is basically the *other I*, because the *other I* is he himself. Yet this certainly is still self-love. But in the same sense it is self-love to love the *other I*, who is the beloved or the friend.

Moreover, just as self-love in the strictest sense has been designated as self-deification, so also erotic love and friendship (as the poet understands it, and with his

understanding this love stands or falls) are idol-worship. Ultimately, love for God is the decisive factor; from this originates love for the neighbor—but paganism had no inkling of this. It left out God, made erotic love and friendship into love, and abhorred self-love. But the Christian love commandment commands loving God above all else, and then loving the neighbor. In erotic love and friendship, preferential love is the middle term; in love for the neighbor, God is the middle term. Love God above all else; then you also love the neighbor and in the neighbor every human being. Only by loving God above all else can one love the neighbor in the other human being. The other human being, this is the neighbor who is the other human being in the sense that the other human being is every other human being. Understood in that way, the discourse was therefore right when it stated at the beginning that if a person loves the neighbor in one single other human being, he then loves all people. (WL, 57-58)

The neighbor is one who is equal. The neighbor is neither the beloved, for whom you have passion's preference, nor your friend, for whom you have passion's preference. Nor is your neighbor, if you are a cultured person, the cultured individual with whom you have a similarity of culture—since with your neighbor you have the equality of a human being before God. Nor is your neighbor someone who is more distinguished than you—that is, he is not the neighbor insofar as he is more distinguished than you, since to love him because he is more distinguished can very easily be preferential love and to that extent self-love. Nor is the neighbor someone who is more lowly than you, that is, insofar as he is more lowly than you he is not the neighbor, since to love someone because he is more lowly than you can so easily be the condescension of preferential love and to that extent self-love. No, to love the neighbor is equality. In your relation to the person of distinction, it is encouraging that in him you *shall* love your neighbor. In relation to the more lowly person, it is humbling that in him you are not to love the more lowly person but *shall* love the neighbor. It is redeeming if you do this, because you *shall* do it. The neighbor is every person, since on the basis of dissimilarity he is not your neighbor, nor on the basis of similarity to you in your dissimilarity from other people. He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God, but unconditionally every person has this equality and has it unconditionally. (WL, 60)

Just as Christianity's joyful message is contained in the doctrine of humanity's inherent kinship with God, so is Christianity's task humanity's likeness to God. But God is love, and therefore we can be like God only in loving, just as we also, according to the words of the apostle, can only be *God's co-workers—in love*. Insofar as you love the beloved, you are not like God, because for God there is no preference, something you have reflected on many times to your humiliation, but also many times to your rehabilitation. Insofar as you love your friend, you are not like God, because for God there is no distinction. But when you love the neighbor, then you are like God. (WL, 62-63)

Love is a need, the deepest need, in the person in whom there is love for the neighbor; he does not need people just to have someone to love, but he needs to love people. Yet there is no pride or haughtiness in this wealth, because God is the middle term, and eternity's *shall* binds and guides this great need so that it does not go astray and turn into pride. But there are no limits to the objects, because the neighbor is all human beings, unconditionally every human being.

Therefore the one who truly loves the neighbor loves also his enemy. The distinction *friend* or *enemy* is a difference in the object of love, but love for the neighbor has the object that is without difference. The neighbor is the utterly unrecognizable dissimilarity between persons or is the eternal equality before God—the enemy, too, has this equality. People think that it is impossible for a human being to love his enemy, because, alas, enemies are hardly able to endure the sight of one another. Well, then, shut your eyes—then the enemy looks just like the neighbor. Shut your eyes and remember the commandment that *you* shall love; then you love—your enemy—no, then you love the neighbor, because you do not see the dissimilarities of earthly life, but enmity is also one of the dissimilarities of earthly life. Moreover, when you shut your eyes, your mind is not distracted and confused just when you are supposed to listen to the words of the commandment. When your mind is not confused and distracted by looking at the object of your love and the dissimilarity of the object, you become all ears for the words of the commandment, as if it spoke only to you, that *you* shall love the neighbor. See, when your eyes are closed and you have become all ears to the commandment, then you are on the way of perfection to loving the neighbor. (WL, 67-68)

Even the one who ordinarily is not inclined to praise God and Christianity does so when with a shudder he considers that depravity, how in paganism people are inhumanly separated one from another by the dissimilarities of earthly life or by the caste system, how this ungodliness inhumanly teaches one human being to disclaim kinship with another, teaches him presumptuously and insanely to say of another human being that he does not exist, is “not born.” Then even he praises Christianity, which has saved human beings from this evil by deeply and forever memorably imprinting the kinship of all human beings—because the kinship is secured by each individual’s equal kinship with and relationship to God in Christ; because the Christian doctrine addresses itself equally to each individual, teaches him that God has created him and Christ has redeemed him . . . (WL, 69)

Everyone who in despair has clung to one or another of the dissimilarities of earthly life so that he centers his life in it, not in God, also demands that everyone who belongs to the same dissimilarity must hold together with him—not in the good (because the good forms no alliance, does not unite two nor hundreds nor all people in an alliance), but in an ungodly alliance against the universally human. The one in despair calls it treason to want to have fellowship with others, with all people. . . . Whoever then will love the neighbor, whoever thus does not concern himself with removing this or that dissimilarity, or with eliminating all of them in a worldly way, but devoutly concerns himself with permeating his dissimilarity with the sanctifying thought of Christian equality—that person easily becomes like one who does not fit into earthly life here, not even with so-called Christendom; he is easily exposed to attacks from all sides; he easily becomes like a lost sheep among ravenous wolves. Everywhere he looks, he naturally sees the dissimilarities (as stated, no human being is pure humanity, but the Christian lifts himself up above the dissimilarities); and those who in a worldly way have clung firmly to a temporal dissimilarity, whatever it may be, are like ravenous wolves. (WL, 73)

From the beginning of the world, no human being exists or has existed who is the neighbor in the sense that the king is the king, the scholar the scholar, your relative your relative—that is, in the sense of exceptionality or, what amounts to the same thing, in the sense of

dissimilarity—no, every human being is the neighbor. In being king, beggar, rich man, poor man, male, female, etc., we are not like each other—therein we are indeed different. But in being the neighbor we are all unconditionally like each other. Dissimilarity is temporality’s method of confusing that marks every human being differently, but the neighbor is eternity’s mark—on every human being. Take many sheets of paper, write something different on each one; then no one will be like another. But then again take each single sheet; do not let yourself be confused by the diverse inscriptions, hold it up to the light, and you will see a common watermark on all of them. In the same way the neighbor is the common watermark, but you see it only by means of eternity’s light when it shines through the dissimilarity. (WL, 89)

A life of a human being begins with the illusion that a long, long time and a whole world lie before him in the distance, begins with the foolhardy delusion that he has such ample time for his many claims. The poet is the eloquent and enthusiastic confidant of this foolhardy but beautiful delusion. But when a person in the infinite transformation discovers the eternal itself so close to life that there is not the distance of one single claim, of one single evasion, of one single excuse, of one single moment of time from what *he* in this instant, in this second, in this holy moment *shall* do—then he is one the way to becoming a Christian. It is a mark of childishness to say: *Me wants, me—me*; a mark of adolescence to say: *I—and I—and I*; the sign of maturity and the devotion of the eternal is to will to understand that this *I* has no significance unless it becomes the *you* to whom eternity incessantly speaks and says: *You shall, you shall, you shall*. Youthfulness wants to be the only *I* in the whole world; maturity is to understand this *you* personally, even if it were not even addressed to a single other person. *You shall, you shall love the neighbor*. O my listener, it is not *you* to whom *I* am speaking; it is *I* to whom eternity says: *You shall*. (WL, 90)

Just as nowadays attempts are made in so many ways to emancipate people from all bonds, also beneficial ones, so also attempts are made to emancipate the emotional relationships between people from the bond that binds one to God and binds one in everything, in every expression of life. In connection with love, there is the desire to teach people something totally new, something for which the now old-fashioned Holy Scripture already has the characteristic expression—there is the desire to teach people the freedom that is “without God in the world.” The abominable era of bond service is past, and so there is the aim of going further— by means of the abomination of abolishing the person’s bond service in relation to God, to whom every human being, not by birth but by creation from nothing, belongs as a bond servant, and in such a way as no bond servant has ever belonged to an earthly master, who at least admits that thoughts and feelings are free; but he belongs to God in every thought, the most hidden; in every feeling, the most secret; in every movement, the most inward. Yet this bond service is found to be a burdensome encumbrance and therefore there is a more or less open intent to depose God in order to install human beings—in the rights of humanity? No, that is not needed; God has already done that—in the rights of God. If God is dismissed the place will indeed be vacant.

As a reward for such presumption, all existence will in that way probably come closer and closer to being transformed into doubt or into a vortex. What, after all, is the Law, what is the Law’s requirement of a person? Well, that is for people to decide. Which people? Here doubt begins. . . . In order to have to begin to act, the individual must first find out

from “the others” what the Law’s requirement is, but each one of these others must in turn as an individual find this out from “the others.” In this way all human life transforms itself into one big excuse—is this perhaps the great, matchless common enterprise, the great achievement of the human race? The category “the others” becomes fanciful, and the fancifully sought determination of what constitutes the Law’s requirement is a false alarm.

. . . But to what can we compare that confused state just described? Is it not a mutiny? Or should we hesitate to call it that if at a given time the whole human race was guilty of it and we then add, note well, that it is a mutiny against God? Or is morality subordinated to coincidence in this way: when a great number do what is wrong, or we all do it, then this wrong is the right? This explanation would in turn be nothing more than a repetition of the thinking of the mutiny or its thoughtlessness, because then it ultimately is people who determine the Law’s requirement instead of God. Therefore the one who forgets this not only becomes personally guilty of rebellion against God but also contributes his share to the mutiny’s gaining the upper hand. Who would stop such a mutiny, if there is one? Should we perhaps repeat the fallacy of the mutiny, but in a new pattern, and each one separately say: I cannot stop it; “the others must”? Is not each individual under an obligation to God to stop the mutiny, not, of course, by loud noise or fancied importance, not by domineeringly wanting to compel others to obey God, but by being unconditionally obedient oneself, by unconditionally holding to the God-relationship and to God’s requirement, and thereby expressing that as far as he is concerned God exists and is the only sovereign, whereas he is an unconditionally obedient subject?

Only when all of us, each one separately, receive our orders at one place, if I may put it this way, and then each one separately unconditionally obeys the same orders, only then are there substance and purpose and truth and actuality in existence. . . . God wants each individual, for the sake of certainty and of equality and of responsibility, to learn for himself the Law’s requirement. When this is the case, there is durability in existence, because God has a firm hold on it. There is no vortex, because each individual begins, not with “the others” and therefore not with evasions and excuses, but begins with the God-relationship and therefore stands firm and thereby also stops, as far as he reaches, the dizziness that is the beginning of mutiny. (*Works of Love*, 114-18)

There is some talk of making a bargain with the evil one, and if one asks what advantages are offered in compensation, mention is made of power, honor, the gratification of desires, and the like. But what people forget to talk about and think about is that by such a bargain one can also manage to be loved by people and to be praised for one’s love. Yet this is the case— since the opposite certainly is and was the case, that those who in love to God loved people became hated in the world. Just as the world has wanted to tempt a person to forget God by offering him power and dominion and then in turn treated the same person as the scum of the earth because he withstood the temptation, so also has the world temptingly offered a person its friendship and in turn hated him because he would not be its friend. The world prefers not to hear anything about the eternal, God’s requirement of love, and likes even less to see it expressed in life. But does the world therefore call itself self-loving? By no means. What, then, does the world do? Then the world says of the person who wants to hold to God that he is self-loving. The expedient is an old one: to sacrifice one person when all the others can profit from it. (WL, 127-128)

Suppose there are two artists and one of them says, “I have traveled much and seen much in the world, but I have sought in vain for a person worth painting. I have found no face that was the perfect image of beauty to such a degree that I could decide to sketch it; in every face I have seen one or another little defect, and therefore I seek in vain.” Would this be a sign that this artist is a great artist? The other artist, however, says, “Well, I do not actually profess to be an artist; I have not traveled abroad either but stay at home with the little circle of people who are closest to me, since I have not found one single face to be so insignificant or so faulted that I still could not discern a more beautiful side and discover something transfigured in it. That is why, without claiming to be an artist, I am happy in the art I practice and find it satisfying.” Would this not be a sign that he is indeed the artist, he who by bringing a certain something with him found right on the spot what the well-traveled artist did not find anywhere in the world--perhaps because he did not bring a certain something with him! Therefore the second of the two would be the artist. Would it not really be sad if what is intended to beautify life could only be like a curse upon it, so that, instead of making life beautiful for us, “art” only fastidiously discovered that none of us is beautiful. (WL, 158)

When it is a duty to love the men we see, then one must first and foremost give up all fanciful and extravagant ideas about a dream-world where the object of love is to be sought and found; that is, one must become sober, win actuality and truth by finding and continuing in the world of actuality as the task assigned to one. . . . When it is a duty in loving to love the people we see, then in loving the actual individual person it is important that one does not substitute an imaginary idea of how we think or could wish that this person should be. (WL, 161, 164)

If your life had been brought to the most crucial decision and you had a friend who on his own initiative loudly and solemnly swore loyalty to you, yes, that he was willing to risk his life for you, and then in the moment of danger he did not stay away (that would have been almost forgivable)—no, he came, he was present, but he did not lift a finger; he calmly stood there and looked on—yet, no, he did not stand calmly; his one and only thought was to save himself and on any condition; he did not even take flight (that would have been almost forgivable); no, he remained standing there as a spectator, which he made sure he could be, by denying you—what then? We shall not even trace the consequences; let us only describe the situation rather vividly and speak quite humanly about it.

So, then, you stood there accused by your enemies, condemned by your enemies; it was literally true that you stood surrounded on every side by enemies. The mighty, who perhaps could have understood you, had hardened themselves against you; they hated you. Therefore you now stood accused and condemned, while a blinded, raging crowd howled insults at you, even rejoicing insanely at the thought that your blood would be upon them and upon their children. And this pleased the mighty, who themselves usually held the crowd in deep contempt; it pleased them because it gratified their hatred that it was brute savagery and the lowest meanness that had found in you its quarry and its prey. You had reconciled yourself to your fate, were conscious of the impossibility of saying one single word, since derision was merely seeking an

opportunity. Thus a magnanimous word about your innocence, as if it were defiance, would give derision a new occasion; thus the clearest proof of your integrity would make derision even more indignant and furious; thus a cry of pain, as if it were cowardliness, would give derision a new occasion.

In this way you stood cast out of human society and yet not cast out; after all, you stood there surrounded by human beings, but not one of them all saw in you a human being, although in another sense they did see in you a human being, because they would not have treated an animal as inhumanly. What horror, more terrible than if you had fallen among wild beasts, for I wonder if even the wild, nocturnal howling of bloodthirsty beasts of prey is as horrible as the inhumanity of a raging crowd. I wonder if one beast of prey in a pack can incite another to greater savagery than is natural for each one separately in the way that one human being in the impenitent crowd can incite another to even more than animal bloodthirstiness and savagery. I wonder if the spiteful or flashing eyes of the most bloodthirsty beast of prey have the fire of evil that is ignited in the individual's eyes when he, incited and inciting, rages with the wild crowd!

In this way you stood—accused, condemned, insulted; you sought in vain to discover a form that still resembled a human being, to say nothing of a kind face upon which your eyes could rest—and then you saw him, your friend, but he denied you. And the derision, which had been strident enough, now sounded as if echo had amplified it a hundred times! (WL, 168-69)

Therefore when the discourse is about the work of love in building up, *either* this must mean that the one who loves implants love in another person's heart, *or* it must mean that the one who loves presupposes that love is in the other person's heart, and by this very presupposition he builds up love in him—from the ground up, provided, of course, that in love he indeed presupposes its presence in the ground. To build up must be one of the two. But can one human being implant love in another human being's heart? No, this is a suprahuman relationship, an inconceivable relationship between human beings; in this sense human love cannot build up. It is God, the Creator, who must implant love in each human being, he who himself is Love. . . . *The one who loves presupposes that love is in the other person's heart and by this very presupposition builds up love in him—from the ground up, provided, of course, that in love he presupposes its presence in the ground.* . . . In this way he draws out the good, he loves forth love, he builds up. Love can and will be treated in only one way, by being loved forth; to love it forth is to build up. But to love it forth is indeed to presuppose that it is present in the ground. (WL, 216-17)

. . . to give up on another as hopelessly lost, as if there were no hope for him, is evidence that one is not oneself a loving person and thus is the one who despairs, who gives up possibility. No one can hope unless he is also loving; he cannot *hope for himself* without also being loving, because the good has an infinite connectedness; but if he is loving, he also hopes for others. In the same degree to which he hopes for others, he hopes for himself, because in the very same degree to which he hopes for others, he is one who loves. And in the very same degree to which he hopes for others, he hopes for himself, because this is the infinitely accurate, the eternal like for like that is in everything eternal. (WL, 255)

But is there not something obscure, something unclear, in this entire deliberation, so that one cannot grasp what the subject is, since “Love hopes all things” can mean that the loving one hopes all things for himself, and it can mean that the loving one lovingly hopes all things for others? But these are indeed one and the same; and this obscurity is the clarity of the eternal, if someone fully understands that they are altogether one and the same. If love hopes all things (and Paul does not say that hope hopes all things but that love hopes all things, simply because, as he says, love is greater than hope), then it follows (from its being love and from what love is) that the one who loves hopes all things for others, since his love indeed conditions his hope for himself. Only earthly understanding (and its clarity is certainly not to be recommended), only earthly understanding, which is no judge of what either love or hope is, thinks that they are two entirely different things, to hope for oneself and to hope for others, and that in turn love is a third thing by itself. Earthly understanding thinks that one can very well hope for oneself without hoping for others and that one does not need love in order to hope for oneself, whereas one certainly needs love in order to hope for others, for the people one loves—and why should one hope for others than these. Earthly understanding does not perceive that love is by no means a separate third thing but is the middle term: without love, no hope for oneself; with love, hope for all others—and to the same degree one hopes for oneself, to the same degree one hopes for others, since to the same degree one is loving. (WL, 259-60)

The vindictive person sometimes says that he hopes to God that vengeance will fall upon the hated one. But truly this is not hoping, this is hating, and it is brazen to call it a hope and blasphemous to want to make God one’s collaborator in hating. (WL, 262)

To have distinctiveness is to believe in the distinctiveness of everyone else, because distinctiveness is not mine but is God’s gift by which he gives being to me, and he indeed gives to all, gives being to all. This is the unfathomable fountain of goodness in God’s goodness that he, the *Omnipotent One*, yet gives in such a way that the receiver acquires distinctiveness, that he who creates out of nothing yet creates distinctiveness, so that the creature in relation to God does not become nothing even though it is taken from nothing and is nothing but becomes a distinctive individuality. (WL, 271-72)