

September 2008—*Rivals to Christ in Our Hearts*

One of the most subtle forms of idolatry is that of placing our love of family ahead of our love and commitment to God. Loving relationships with our parents, spouses, and children are among the most precious blessings of human existence, and followers of Christ should excel in this area of life. However, it is possible for our deep bonds of love and affection—so good within God-given limits—to exceed their proper boundaries and supplant the supremacy of Christ in our life. This is often hard to recognize because it is a matter of the good becoming the enemy of the best.

C.S. Lewis was utterly realistic about this danger and Christ's teaching about it.

As so often, Our Lord's own words are both far fiercer and far more tolerable than those of the theologians. He says nothing about guarding against earthly loves for fear we might be hurt; He says something that cracks like a whip about trampling them all under foot the moment they hold us back from following Him. "If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother and wife...and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

But how are we to understand the word *hate*? That Love Himself should be commanding what we ordinarily mean by hatred—commanding us to cherish resentment, to gloat over another's misery, to delight in injuring him—is almost a contradiction in terms. I think Our Lord, in the sense here intended, "hated" St. Peter when He said, "Get thee behind me." To hate is to reject, to set one's face against, to make no concession to, the Beloved when the Beloved utters, however sweetly and however pitifully, the suggestions of the Devil. A man, said Jesus, who tries to serve two masters, will "hate" the one and "love" the other. It is not, surely, mere feelings of aversion and liking that are here in question...

So, in the last resort, we must turn down or disqualify our nearest and dearest when they come between us and our obedience to God. Heaven knows, it will seem to them sufficiently like hatred. We must not act on the pity we feel; we must be blind to tears and deaf to pleadings.

I will not say that this duty is hard; some find it too easy; some, hard almost beyond endurance. What is hard for all is to know when the occasion for such "hating" has arisen. Our temperaments deceive us. The meek and tender—uxorious husbands, submissive wives, doting parents, dutiful children—will not easily believe that it has ever arrived. Self-assertive people, with a dash of the bully in them, will believe it too soon. That is why it is of such extreme importance so to order our loves that it is unlikely to arrive at all.¹

Has your love for parents, spouse, children—indeed, anyone—become a rival to Christ that holds you back from obedience? This is not a question for a quick response. Rather, it is one on which to ponder and to ask for the Holy Spirit's illumination of our deepest motivations and loyalties as they relate to Christ.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 171-173.