

“Love: The Christian Way of Life”

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

November 10, 2002

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Remember, now, we are in a long section devoted to problems in the worship services of the Corinthian church. The pride and self-love of at least a number of these Christians were spilling over into the Sunday worship itself. The spiritual gifts with which the Holy Spirit had graced that church were being employed for purposes of self-aggrandizement rather than for the edification of the body. Paul has just argued in chapter 12 that the gifts of the Spirit were given for the common good and that they were meant to foster not to damage the unity of the congregation. He now follows that argument up with a general exhortation to live a life of love for one another. Chapter 13 is a digression from the main argument itself in which chapter 14 follows closely on chapter 12, but it is a digression of immense importance. He has already said in 8:1 that “love builds up.” Now he is going to show us *how* love builds up.

The chapter has been divided, aptly I think, into three sections: vv. 1-3 the necessity of love; vv. 4-7 the character or nature of love; and vv. 8-13 the permanence of love. [Fee, 628]

- v.1 Note the shift to the first person here. Paul is using himself again as an example. And he begins with tongues because it was the spiritual gift nearest and dearest to the Corinthians’ hearts.
- v.2 These too were the flashy gifts that the Corinthians were congratulating themselves for possessing.
- v.3 It was not the first time and not the last when ego and the thirst for power would lurk behind ostensibly Christian virtues and actions. What is striking about the first three verses is that, in every case, these were powers and gifts that the Apostle Paul himself had. He was a prophet, he worked miracles, he revealed mysteries, he had suffered the loss of all things for Christ’s sake, and so on. He speaks with a special authority for no Corinthian had gifts such as the Apostle had been given. But still he will say, without love it is all worthless and I’m worthless.
- v.4 You will notice that what follows in Paul’s characterization of love is all behavior, not feeling. We tend to think of love as primarily a feeling; the Bible invariably thinks of it first as a way of life, a behavior, a commitment to others. Patient – it puts up with a lot; kind – it gives a lot. It is content with itself, and humble before God and man. There was certainly a considerable amount of envy in the church, rivalry between teachers, the poor looking wistfully at the rich, those with lesser gifts at those with the more powerful ones.
- v.5 It is not too much to believe that Paul is, in each case, thinking of the Corinthians, when he describes now what love *is not*! They were rude, treating one another as they did at the Lord’s Supper, as we read in chapter 11; they were self-seeking, as we read in chapter 12 and will read again in chapter 14.

By not rude Paul means that love is considerate of others' feelings and takes care not to offend; by keep no record of wrongs he means that it does not hold a grudge.

- v.7 With regard to love not delighting in evil and always protecting, I have written into the margin of my Bible Charles Simeon's "rules for himself."
1. To hear as little as possible what is the prejudice of others;
 2. To believe nothing of the kind till I am absolutely forced to it;
 3. Never to drink into the spirit of one who circulates an ill report;
 4. Always to moderate, as far as I can, the unkindness which is expressed toward others;
 5. Always to believe, that if the other side were heard, a very different account would be given of the matter.
- And, with regard to love always trusting, always protecting, always hoping, hear this from C.S. Lewis.
- "To love involves trusting the beloved beyond the evidence, even against much evidence. No man is our friend who believes in our good intentions only when they are proved. No man is our friend who will not be very slow to accept evidence against them. Such confidence, between one man and another, is in fact almost universally praised as a moral beauty, not blamed as a logical error."
- v.8 This text, as you may know, has been a crucial one in the debate between those who still believe the supernatural, the miraculous gifts – such as tongues and healing – still are to be found in the church today and those who believe that they ceased in the age of the apostles, belonged only to that generation in which the foundation of the church was laid, and were never intended for the ordinary life of the church. It is probably too much weight to put on this text. Paul's point is simply that while these spiritual gifts are of limited duration, love will endure forever. And so he sets forth three of the spiritual gifts that are temporary, are destined to come to an end.
- v.10 That is, the Corinthians have made the mistake of valuing the partial and the temporary over that which is final and eternal *and love is that already here in this world*. And how little and imperfect is our knowledge. We know only the thousandth part of what we do not know.
- v.11 In vv. 11-12 Paul elaborates his point about their present knowledge being imperfect and temporary. He expresses by way of two analogies the point he made in 9-10. He is still talking about the difference between the present and the future, between the incomplete and imperfect and the perfect. [Fee, 646] The time is coming when our knowledge, now imperfect, will be perfect. The imperfect will fall away. But love never comes to an end. Love is for now and forever!
- v.12 The choice of analogy probably stems from the fact that Corinth was famous as the producer of the finest bronze mirrors of antiquity.

- v.13 This famous triad sums up the entire Christian life: we live in faith, trusting in Jesus Christ for our salvation; we live in hope of the future guaranteed to us by Christ's death and resurrection; and we live in love, serving one another as dear brothers and sisters. Love is the greatest because it alone of the three continues forever, after faith has given way to sight and hope to fulfillment.

We have before us one of the most beautiful, the most memorable, and the most convicting passages in a book full of beautiful, memorable and convicting passages. In a few words the Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has forever told us and all mankind what love is and what it is not. Paul is, of course, speaking here not of our love for God or his for us, though that love too is revealed here in a secondary way. Nor is he speaking about romantic or married love, though that love too is revealed here in a general way. He is not speaking directly about the love of parents for children or children for parents. Paul is speaking of brotherly love, the love Christians are to have for and practice toward one another.

He does not give us, to be sure, a precise definition of love. I don't know of anywhere in the Bible where love is *defined* in so many words. Sin is given a definition. "Sin is lawlessness," John says, "sin is the breaking of God's law." But, nowhere do we find such a simple and straightforward definition of love. But Paul here and the Bible as a whole do not leave us in any doubt about what love is. It is a whole-souled commitment to another person and to that person's welfare. It is a commitment that embraces mind, and will, affections and emotions, thoughts, attitudes, and, most profoundly, actions. "God is love," the Bible says, and, from the beginning of the Bible to its end, we are taught about love chiefly by being shown what Christ did, what he suffered, what price he paid, to secure the salvation of his people. And we are to love others as he loved us.

Now Paul says two things about love, in particular here. Two things that sum up all the detail of this beautiful chapter. Two things that together are calculated – if we have Christian blood in our veins and if we have a Christian conscience – two things that are calculated to set us hungering and thirsting after more and more of this grace of love and to be wholly dissatisfied and agitated until we obtain much more of it from the hand of God.

- I. First, he says that love is fundamental to Christianity, it is basic; more than other parts of our lives as Christians, it is indispensable. Love is the sum and substance of that obedience we owe to God.*

He says this both negatively and positively. First he says to these Corinthian believers who were recipients of those extraordinary gifts and the experiences that went with them – miraculously speaking foreign languages, giving prophecies directly from God, healing the sick by merely a word or touch – greater powers than these it is hard to imagine; nothing more amazing has ever been seen in the world, but if love is missing these gifts and powers are nothing, and you who have them are nothing also. Without love the most powerful person, the most famous person, the most influential person, the most admired person is a zero! He or she is not simply a zero in one person's estimation, he or she *is* a zero. In fact, worse than that and lower than a zero.

Because, if you haven't love, it isn't just that your gifts don't count, they actually become just so many aggravations of your sin and guilt. You have taken God's great and wonderful gifts which were given to you for love's sake, and you have turned them into the servants of your own ego and vanity and self-centeredness.

Then Paul says the same thing positively. Love is fundamental in the Christian life because it is the permanent thing, the perfect thing. Love is the unchanging and unchangeable part of living the Christian life. The gifts would come and go, prophecies, and special knowledge from God as well. What is more, suppose the Holy Spirit had given to one man or one woman all the gifts in the highest conceivable measure, still he or she would be nothing but a glimpse of the world to come and once he or she was in heaven, the need for those gifts would immediately disappear.

But love, on the other hand, never becomes unnecessary, in this world or the world to come. Love will be as important in the perfect world to which believers are going as it is here and now.

Jonathan Edwards' celebrated work, *Charity and its Fruits*, originated as a series of sermons on 1 Corinthians 13. The last chapter of that book, entitled "Heaven, a World of Love," is considered by Edwards' scholars to be some of the great man's most splendid writing. It is a description of how the life of God's people in heaven will be a life of love and how love will come into its full rights there.

"[In heaven] they...shall ever live to love God, and love the saints, and to enjoy their love in all its fulness and sweetness forever. They shall be in no fear of any end to this happiness, or of any abatement from its fulness and blessedness, or that they shall ever be weary of its exercises and expressions, or cloyed with its enjoyments, or that the beloved objects shall ever grow old or disagreeable, so that their love shall at last die away. All in heaven shall flourish in immortal youth and freshness. Age will not there diminish anyone's beauty or vigour; and there love shall abide in every one's heart, as a living spring perpetually springing up in the soul, or as a flame that never dies away. And the holy pleasure of this love shall be as a river that is for ever flowing clear and full, and increasing continually." [347-348]

Well, when I finished Edwards on love in heaven I thought, "now what would Dante say about that? What did he see when he was taken up to heaven in his sanctified imagination?" And if you read the closing cantos of the *Paradiso*, those which describe the poet's vision when at last he was lifted up into the very presence of God and was given finally to see the things that cannot be described in the language of this world, you will find that Dante finished his great work with the same thought with which Edwards finished his.

For in the presence of those radiant beams
 One is so changed, that tis impossible
 To turn from it to any other sight –
 How powerless is speech – how weak, compared
 To my conception, which itself is trifling
 Beside the mighty vision that I saw!

My power now failed that phantasy sublime:
 My will and my desire were both revolved,
 As is a wheel in even motion driven,
 By *love*, which moves the sun and other stars.

Love is how *we* must *now* live; love is how the saints of God *shall forever* live. Love is the principle of that everlasting life that begins when a sinner is saved in this world, becomes a new creature in Jesus Christ, and the principle that continues unchanged and forever in the world to come.

Now, that being so, Paul says, it is foolishness in a high degree to go chasing and pining after that which lasts only for a short time and neglect what remains and matters forever. Zealous for the immediate boost to their prestige, these Christians were indifferent to what God has made the central and everlasting principle of the Christian life.

Take the Lord's word to heart, brothers and sisters. Love is to be everything in your life and mine, love as Paul here defines it, love as a commitment of the heart and the will, a selfless devotion. It is the measure of your life and mine.

1. It is the first evidence of our salvation. In the Bible we read that the fruit of the Spirit is love and also that whoever does not love his brother does not know God, for God is love.
2. Love is the foundation of the Christian character, as the Bible says, we are rooted and grounded in love.
3. Love is both the evidence and the instrument of faith, for as the Bible says, faith works through love.
4. Love is the path we are to walk, for the Bible says that we are to walk in love.
5. Love is the cement that binds the church together and makes it strong, as the Bible says, saints are knit together in love.
6. Love is our protection in the spiritual warfare, and we are commanded therefore to put on the breastplate of love.
7. And love is the sum of all our duty, as we are often told: love is the fulfillment of God's law.

Now, we are all too much of the time interested in other things than this love. Some of us would rather have knowledge and we read books and study arguments. Some of us would rather have station or position, others want success in this way or that, even in the church. Others, and all of us too much, are more interested in simple things such as pleasure and money. How often do you say to yourself or to others that your goal in life, your highest hope and aspiration is *to be* someone who loves others greatly. That you want above all things to be known for your love. That you will be missed when you are gone above all else for the love you showed to others. Love is not, far too often, the be all and end all of our lives.

But, in all of that, we are manifesting the same foolishness that Paul had to rebuke so sternly in the Corinthian Christians. "Get love," Paul says, "and the rest will take care of itself." If you have love and nothing else you will live a triumphant Christian life; if you have everything else

and not love, your life when measured in the only scales that matter, will be an abject failure. If there is anything you and I need more often and more seriously to repent of, then, it is just our lack of love. And if there is anything we need to set our sights on more resolutely and with maximum determination, it is this brotherly love. Being and doing as Paul has described the life of love in vv. 4-7.

II. Paul's second main point is that love is a Christian grace, a virtue that is rooted and grounded in Christ and his salvation.

Now, we are the first to admit that love is not limited to believers in Jesus Christ. Human beings, created in the image of the God of love, know something about love whether or not they are Christians. They have a need for it, a fascination with it, and to some degree many practice it, to some degree.

Most serious novels have something about love in them; movies are perpetually interested in love, and not just romantic love. Most songs played on the radio have love as their theme. Love is in the air, we say.

But, the love of which Paul is speaking here, is something unique to the family of God.

Did you notice v. 3? Paul wrote, "If I give all I possess to the poor...and have not love, I gain nothing." You see, the world things *that is* love; what more could there be to love than giving all you have to the poor. To do good things for others, to make sacrifices for others, surely *that is* love.

But, no, Paul says, there is more to love than that. Love includes that to be sure, but it runs deeper and goes further back. It embraces motives and attitudes. He goes on to say that love is not self-seeking. It doesn't do the right thing for the wrong reason; it doesn't help others for the sake of reputation or return. Further, love does not rejoice in evil but rejoices in the truth.

And this is why so much of our world, hungering for love as it is and cannot help to be, does little more than stumble about in the dark, looking for love but unable to find it. It does not know the truth, it cannot get past itself and its own self-absorption and self-worship. No one who is in the dark about sin, about Jesus Christ, about the law of God and the love of God, about how unworthy sinners are saved, no one, that is who is in the dark about reality, about the meaning of human life, about the place where the power to live it can be found, can ever really *love* another human being.

He cannot forget himself because sin has, in Augustine's memorable phrase, curved man in upon himself. No one thoroughly stuck on himself can truly love another. What is more, his motivations are a mess. He cannot really see to another person's welfare, because he does not understand what that welfare consists in or how it is to be obtained. His sporadic efforts to help often do more harm than good.

Really to love another human being requires knowing the grace of God and the salvation of Jesus Christ, because it requires that change in heart, that new birth, that new creation that frees a person from bondage to self-love and the darkness and foolishness of sin. That is what St.

Theresa meant when she said that “Satan could not be Satan any longer if he could once love his neighbor as himself.” To do that, you see, you must have the new heart, you must know Jesus Christ and the grace of God, you must have new motives and new longings and new powers within you.

Love is not a technique in the Bible. We are never taught the five easy steps to love or the ten ways to become a loving person. Love is the humility that comes from a profound sense of one’s own sin and guilt and unworthiness expressing itself toward others. Love is the gratitude for an inexpressibly great salvation, purchased at terrible cost to God and given freely to you while you were his enemy, expressing itself toward others. Love is a devotion to God and a hunger and thirst to live a Christ-like life expressing itself toward others. Love is the knowledge of heaven and of rescue from hell expressing itself toward others. Love is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit expressing itself toward others.

The key to growing in love is to grow in the graces of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The key to growing in love is to recognize that no one can do any kind of justice to the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ if he or she does not express them toward others. *That* is what takes impatience and envy and pride and rudeness and selfishness and anger and grudge-keeping right out of a man or woman’s heart. It needs something as great as the cross of Christ and the death of the Son of God and the resurrection from the dead and the promise of eternal life in the world of joy, to make a man or woman truly love others.

Our life is far too often summed up in these words:

I lived for myself, I thought for myself,
For myself and none beside –
Just as if Jesus had never lived,
As if he had never died.

Ah, but take Christ’s life and death and resurrection to heart, take your own salvation to heart, take the fate that would have been yours had Christ not intervened on your behalf and rescued you in the nick of time from the brink of the abyss, take that to heart, and then listen to your Savior say,

“If you love me you will keep my commands. This is my command: Love each other.”