



Christian love

"The greatest of these is love." 1 Corinthians 13:13

To exalt love above all other graces seems a dangerous thing to do. To give it the primacy over the faith that saves and the hope that inspires is to run the risk of tumbling into the destructive doctrine that, "Nothing matters but love". That large sectors of the modern church make this their sole message and that secular society has adopted it as a slogan to excuse all manner of lax morality does two things. It leads, by way of righteous reaction, to the softening-down of the biblical truth and it affords striking illustration of the fact that over-emphasis of an isolated truth leads straight to the imbalance of heresy. The classical statement of New Testament teaching on Christian love which this chapter brings us is a sure guide for avoiding either extreme.

Paul does, of course, give the primacy to love. He lays great stress and emphasis on its place and importance in Christian life. But he does this in a healthy and balanced fashion. He begins by showing us that it is a grace fundamental to any sort of Christian living. Without it faith, or knowledge, or maturity, or sacrifice — no matter how great — are null and void. Now, he is not saying that, "Nothing matters but love". What he is saying is that to have all that belongs to orthodox Christian doctrine and normal Christian life and yet to be without love is to be — nothing at all.

It is highly significant that this strongly-worded statement on love comes to us in a letter written to a Church in which all was not well. A letter written, in fact, because of many wrongs that required to be righted. The earlier parts of the letter show that the Church in Corinth was in rather a sad state. It was split with party divisions and plagued with divided loyalties. It contained factions pledging adherence to men rather than to Christ. It was tainted with immorality and dogged with pagan practices of the city that history has dubbed, "The cesspool of the East". It placed a premium on certain charismatic gifts, the abuse of which had led to confusion and chaos. There was drunkenness amongst its communicants, abuses of the Lord's Supper and serious disorder in the conduct of public worship. It was into this situation, then, that this great declaration on love was first sent. It is in this letter, not just as a classical statement of what true Christian love is, but as a corrective for Christian living. It sets out a simple, but basic principle. The Christian life is to be lived out in Christian love. Love, not charismatic gifts, is the true hallmark of the Spirit's work. Love is to be the controlling factor in Christian character and Christian conduct.

The love that is being put forward by Paul here is not that of a vague emotion or a sentimental attitude but the transforming force of God's grace at work in human experience. There is nothing nebulous or soft about that. It surfaces in a very concrete way and produces the attractive blend of a tough mind and a tender heart. It shapes strong character and controls personal conduct and action.

In order to see why Paul gives love the lead in the list of christian graces and to illustrate its nature we can do no better than look, briefly, at how he stresses its effects at the practical level of Christian living. This he does in verses 4-7 of our chapter and we shall use these as the Apostolic commentary upon the thought of our text.

He begins by personifying love. It is not a quality that can be understood or known in the abstract. It comes to light in the concrete situation of everyday life and so he makes it live and act for us. What he says of love is what should, and must be, true for every person who professes to be a Christian. He gives us, first of all:

The general characteristics of Christian love

These are two, and they form a very simple but very basic criterion by which to test the reality of a work of grace in the life of a person or a church. They are the product of the Spirit's quickening work in the sinful human heart. Note them in the order in which Paul gives them.

Love suffers long. It is patient. It carries a quality of tough endurance with it that rests every issue of its hopes, desires and aspirations on the good and perfect will of God. It never gives up, and it never runs out. It may have to meet and deal with difficult people and difficult situations but no difficulty will quench its reality or smother its power. No matter how it is treated, it never stops loving. It has the basic characteristic of extended and lasting patience. It will meet attempts to baffle it. It will often be hurt and sorely wounded — but its patient nature will keep it at work. That is what Paul is saying. And that is a pretty rugged test when we apply it to our own character and our own conduct as Christians. We can appreciate, very easily, that this kind of love was urgently needed in that spiritually sick Corinthian Church. And, we can see too, that it was being exercised in no mean way by the very man who was writing this letter into the chaos of its situation — he begins his letter by a wonderful demonstration of it: "*To the Church of God which is at Corinth*". That acknowledgement and recognition of this faction-ridden people as Christian, speaks of his patience with them, and his love for them. So often, in the history of the Church it has been otherwise. So often, with us too, one fears it is otherwise. Let a person disagree with us, or differ from us and we write them off and discountenance them completely. Surely, if the patience of love was needed in Corinth it is needed just as much in us? It is needed in our homes, in our place of work, in our congregations and right through our denomination. It is needed in all our dealings with our fellows. It is so easy to be impatient with others - indeed, some make it their boast that, "they do not suffer fools gladly". Simple, unimportant, even, as patience may seem, it is given by Paul as the first ingredient in this general picture of what true Christian love is.

Love is kind. Here is the second element in the basic character of love. What a simple little word, and yet how many of us lack just this very quality in our dealings with other people. It takes real thoughtfulness before we can be kind. That is conveyed in the original for the word carries the idea of "going out in front" — a going ahead in order to make the way easier. So what Paul is saying here is that love is thoughtful of others —it puts itself out in order to be helpful. Again, we are being presented with a very simple, but very searching, test which we can apply to our own individual situations and by which we can measure our own conduct.

These then — *patience* and *kindness* — are two basic characteristics of the love the Apostle is concerned with and they form the background to the more particular things he has yet to say. From them we begin to learn, already, that the love Paul is writing about is not just a nebulous emotion. Already we begin to see it as a life moulded by the free grace of God and gripped by the power of great mercy and patterned upon the love, the patience and kindness, that flows out to lost men in the redemptive work of Christ Himself. No matter what other graces we may pretend to, there is something radically wrong with our christian living if we lack patience and kindness toward others.

Having given us these qualities that form the very warp and weft of Christian love the Apostle then goes on to show love overcoming problems in three specific realms and he points us to:

The basic conduct of Christian love

Here, he deals, first of all with the realm of personal living. Every Christian has to learn to live with himself and here the power of Christian love must play a major role. Paul gives us five negatives here that speak of five dangers to our personal progress in the spiritual life. Reasons of space dictate just an indication, rather than an exposition, of his thought.

Love envies not. It is not jealous. It does not grudge a higher place to others. It does not despise those more gifted or more gracious than itself. It shuns that hard, sour, bitter spirit that jealousy carries along in its bosom. Cruel as the grave, jealousy is a destructive force. It does far more damage to the envious person himself than to the one he envies. It belongs to the sinful, fallen

nature. It can, itself, only be done away with by the love that Christ sheds abroad in the heart. Again, it was probably a root cause of the state of things in Corinth. And it is the root of much bitterness in every heart, or church, or denomination in which it rears its head. Well, true Christian love refuses to be jealous. It will have nothing to do with it.

Love vaunts not itself. It is never boastful. It is not over-anxious to impress others with its own gifts or its own graces. It dreads the sham of a self-imposed piety. It is not always indulging in comparisons to the detriment of others and the exaltation of self.

Love is not puffed up. It is not arrogant. It is not proud. It does not cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. It fears that it may detract from the glory of the Saviour. It recognises that humility of the deepest kind really belongs to it. It refuses to regard itself as one of the spiritual *elite*, or to put other believers into the category of spiritual commoners.

Love does not behave itself unseemly. It is never rude. It cherishes that rather scarce commodity —good manners! It attempts to behave as though in the very Presence of the Lord. (And of course, that is where it always is!) It is careful of its appearance and of its behaviour. It seeks to avoid every appearance of evil.

Love seeks not its own. It is not selfish. It learns that difficult lesson, to put the needs of others first. It does not always insist on having its own way.

These, then, are the ways in which Christian love refuses to think or to act. Operating in the renewed heart, it lays powerful restraints on the native tendencies of its subject. And it is worth noting that all the forces it restrains and negates are the very ones which are so strong to destroy personal peace and to make personal character a warped and ugly thing.

Envy, pride, boasting, rudeness and selfishness. These are the terrible things that love topples from their throne in the heart and which it will not allow to reign unchecked. There is the acid-test that each one of us must apply to our own Christian life. In the measure in which we indulge these sinful tendencies we will grieve the Holy Spirit and lose the comforting sense of the Lord's presence.

Paul then goes on to deal with love and the effects it produces in the realm of interpersonal relationships. This is an area of life where, since sin first invaded human nature, it has wrought dreadful havoc and devastation. How does love in the redeemed life operate in this delicate sphere? Paul indicates four things:

Love is not easily provoked. It is not irritable. It is not touchy and always ready to be offended. It deals especially tenderly with the person who "gets on our nerves" and who resists every overture of friendship. It perseveres with the awkward customer and learns to take slights and insults in the spirit of the Master Himself.

Love thinks no evil. It does not keep an account of evil done to it. Nor is it continually listing and tabulating the faults and the failings of its fellow-Christians. It is not suspicious of the thoughts and motives of others. It does not harbour evil reactions towards those who may have injured it. Rather, because it rejoices in the free forgiveness of God, it readily and easily forgives others.

Love rejoices not in iniquity. It refuses to gloat over the sins and wrongs of others. Often, our own sins tempt us to do this very thing — to set ourselves in a better light than we deserve by painting others in a darker shade than the facts warrant. Love does not do this. Instead of spreading the sins of its fellows out to the gaze of all and sundry it seeks to cover them. It wants to shield the reputation of its brother. It seeks to restore the fallen. It does not hasten to the place of gossip, it turns to the place of prayer. It is sad and it weeps when it hears of the fall of a believer. And, it takes heed to its own need lest it fall in the same way itself.

Love rejoices in the truth. It loves to deal in the realm of truth and fact, and it refuses to trade in rumour and gossip. It delights in the Truth of God and in all who seek to uphold and defend it. More, it looks for, and rejoices in, the good points of a brother's character. It balances any weaknesses it may see in him by looking at the strength and graces that are also there. Its deepest sympathies and truest joys are with the righteous and it delights to see them prosper.

And finally, Paul touches on love as it works in the realm of personal relationship with God.

Love bears all things. It sees God as the ruler of all its providences and the disposer of all its days. Some of His dealings it does not understand but, where it does not understand, it accepts and rests in the assurance that, *"all things work together for good, to them that love God"*.

Love believes all things. This does not mean that love is very gullible and that it does not exercise a careful spirit of critical discernment but rather, that there is no end to its trust when it comes to the dealings of God with it. It accepts in faith all the promises of God and refuses to question the truth of what God says or the justice of all that God does. It has the very spirit that characterised Job for it, too, says, *"Though he slay me, yet will I trust him"*.

Love hopes all things. It has strong confidence as well as strong convictions. In every time of difficulty or trial it looks to God for deliverance. Its pathway through life is lit up with that light that shines more and more unto the perfect day. It says, *"If God be for us, who can be against us?"* It looks, not at the things alone which are seen but, also, at the things which are unseen. It knows that God is yet going to bestow a crown of glory that never fades away.

Love endures all things. It is willing to bear suffering and affliction for the Lord's sake. The word, "endure", has an active rather than a passive sense and points to the overcoming of all difficulties with undaunted vigour. It carries the notion of standing firmly in the face of enemy assault. It perseveres in the face of persecution and uses every hazard as a stepping-stone to new victories in the service of Christ.

That commentary of Paul fills out the thought of our text for us. It gives meaning and content to the love of which he speaks. It shows it to be a powerful force in Christian experience and one that operates at all the vital places of Christian living — in the area of one's relationship to oneself; in the area of one's relationship to one's fellows; and in the area of one's relationship to God Himself.

We dare not go through that exposition of love by the Apostle without remembering that its application has force, not only to the situation in Corinth of old, but to Christian people and Christian Churches in every age. We must, by the Grace of God, let this corrective search our character and probe our conduct. As it does so it will drive home to us the need — the pressing need — for every believer among us to hold the truth in love; that love without which all our preaching and witness becomes as *"sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal"*.

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