

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

Great Chapters of the Bible: 1 Corinthians 13

"There's too much love in the world". I couldn't help smiling at one elderly lady's assessment of the antics of the young couple she was watching. And yet, later, as I thought about what she had said, it struck me as a sad reflection on how modern society values love. It seems that as soon as love is mentioned, only its physical aspect is thought of. And yet, as we shall see, love is so much more than just physical attraction. Modern society so often confuses lust with love and then, when problems arise, hearts become cynical, and love becomes nothing more than a romantic ideal. An old childhood rhyme expresses quite simply the true wonder of love:

*"Love ever gives, forgives, outlives,
Ever stands with open hands,
And while it lives, it gives.
For this is love's prerogative,
To give and give and give."*

As we come to today's chapter, few could doubt that this chapter, as a whole, has few rivals, for its grandeur, amongst English literature. We have already looked at some splendid chapters contained in the Bible. Here in 1 Corinthians 13 we have some truly inspiring words. Not that this is some sentimental ballad to romantic attachment. No, here we have a rich description of the practical necessity for love.

Today we shall look at this unique chapter in three ways. After a few introductory comments to set the context of the chapter, we shall see the way in which the apostle Paul firstly describes the vital nature of love. Secondly, we shall look at the values that love has. Thirdly we shall then see a victorious love.

The Christians to whom Paul was writing, in Corinth, had been saved during Paul's second missionary journey. He wrote to them soon afterwards. In terms of quantity of service, they had no equals. Numerous gifted individuals were a part of the Corinthian church. However, all was not well. Rival factions (chapter 1), sexual immorality (chapter 5) and doctrinal chaos (chapter 11) were all problems that Paul was now attempting to correct.

The Corinthian Christians placed great emphasis on the exercise of the spiritual gifts that God had given them. In chapter 12, Paul shows how diverse the gifts that God gives are, and yet together they are to be used to the benefit of the one body. In God's eye, there is only one Christian Church. It is united, and it is under the sole authority of His Son, Jesus Christ. In chapter 14, Paul goes on to show when and how these gifts are to be used, and by whom. The principles set out in these chapters are just as valid today as they were to the early church, particularly if we are to avoid the chaos that so spoiled the testimony of the Corinthian believers. In between these two chapters, then, Paul deals with what is essential if these gifts were to be used for God's glory, rather than the puffing up of the individual with a particular gift.

The vital nature of love.

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing."

In these first three verses we see just how vital true love is for the correct use of the gifts God has given. In verse 1, we have in view the heart, in verse 2, the mind, and in verse 3, the body. In other words, the whole of human life is covered by this necessity for love.

In Luke 6:45, we read "for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks". I could speak the most wonderful things, in an altogether miraculous manner, but without love, Paul says, it would all be empty. Loud and impressive, maybe, like the echo of a cave, but empty all the same. Love is like the conductor of an orchestra who brings together all the many sounds to forge one harmony. Without the conductor, all would remain just a cacophony of disjointed sound. In verse 2, Paul envisages a person with the ability to speak the mind of the Lord on all occasions,

understanding all things that had previously not been revealed, knowing the whole plan of God. Added to this, they had a faith that was absolute. Yet Paul says that, without love, this amounts to nothing. The most powerful war-horse, not correctly harnessed, is a liability to its rider. A mind not harnessed by love is likely to prove destructive to others. In verse 3, Paul envisages one ready to make the ultimate sacrifice, giving away everything, including life itself. And yet without love it is valueless. Jonesville and Waco, to name but two, suffice to show how futile, even damaging to the cause of Christ, is a desire for martyrdom not guided by love. Nate Saint, the martyred missionary in Ecuador, who died at the hands of the Auca Indians, often wrote about how he was ready to die in the cause of Christ. In his pioneering missionary aviation work, this was a real possibility. However, he said that he would much rather live for Christ first. Such an individual, as Paul describes in verses 1-3, is clearly imaginary. None could live up to the great heights that Paul describes here, and yet without love, it would still all be worthless. The Corinthian Christians were behind no one in the use of spiritual gifts, and yet there was nothing for God in any of it, unless it was motivated and controlled by love.

But what is Christian love? When Jesus says in John 13:34, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another" was He only asking us to get on with each other as best we can? Or in Paul's words, in his letter to the Ephesians 5:25, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it" Was he only saying that we should give it our best, and if it doesn't work out, then walk away? No, in these beautiful words that we shall read next, we shall see just how great a challenge faces us. I realise how far short I come of what God requires of me. As we look at the values of love, let us quietly reflect on to what extent they find any echo in our lives.

The values of love.

"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails."

Here we have a description of love: sixteen qualities in all. Eight are positive; eight negative, together making a perfect whole, an example for us to follow.

If I was to be asked to describe the beauty of the Lake District, in Cumbria, I could go to a dictionary and use the definitions for mountains and valleys, lakes and fields. What a poor and cold exercise this would be however! Better by far, if I described the picture in my mind's eye, of the Honister Pass on a warm spring day, or the drop into Grasmere as rays of light break through dark storm clouds. It is so much better to describe reality than to try to define the abstract. And so, I believe that as Paul wrote the words that we have just read, he is not defining an abstract virtue but looking at the One who only ever expressed love in all that He did. Let us now try to see what may have been running through Paul's mind as he wrote these words. I am sure that later, each of us could think of other, better examples of each of the facets of love that Paul describes.

Love suffers long: first in our list is the perfect antidote to today's 'instant' society. Love is patient, ready to wait for the proper time to act. So we see in Luke 22:63, how the guards mocked Jesus and beat Him. Did Jesus act to assert His rights or gain His revenge? No, He was ready to wait until that day when those self same guards will bow their knees to Him and confess Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Love is kind: in Luke 5:13, we read about how Jesus reached out and touched the leper. Sure, Jesus could have spoken a healing word, from a distance, and made the man well but left him inside feeling like an outcast still. No, perhaps for the first time in many years, the leper felt the touch of another human and was made whole again on the inside, as well as cured on the outside. Simple, beautiful kindness, that is ready to do that bit extra, unasked for but never unrewarded.

Love does not envy: there is no room for selfish jealousy in love. It gladly rejoices in the good of others, happy in its own lot in life. In Luke 20:25, we hear Jesus tell His questioners to render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. If ever anyone had the right to demand everything, it was Jesus. Yet He had given Caesar limited authority, for a time, and so was happy to let Caesar have what was due to him, knowing that one day Jesus will be all in all.

Love does not parade itself: the Corinthian Christians were guilty of parading their gifts to their own glory. How very human, using what God alone can give as if somehow it depended on their ability. How very unlike Jesus, who in John 14:28, would say "for My Father is greater than I". There was no room for boasting in His ability or nature. There was room though for humble subjection to the One who had sent Him to be the Saviour of the world.

Love is not puffed up: there is no room for arrogance in the one who loves. In Luke 2:51, we read that the child Jesus "came to Nazareth, and was subject to them". Having been sent by His Father as a child, Jesus would take His place as a child, not presuming to be anywhere other than where His Father had put Him.

Love does not behave rudely: how impressive is the restraint of the Lord at the wedding of Cana. In John 2:4, Jesus does not immediately impose Himself on the steward of the feast, but waits to be asked. So often we can do what is right so awkwardly. Love, then, is the oil that cools the heat of friction in our dealings with one another, allowing the smooth operation of the church as a whole.

Love does not seek its own: in John 5:17, Jesus said, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working". In unerring obedience to His Father's plan, Jesus worked. He studied, not to impress others with His knowledge, but to teach others. He worked, not to enrich Himself, but to enrich the lives of others. Love finds its fulfilment, not in self-seeking pleasure, but in selflessness.

Love is not provoked: due to lack of sleep, and the pressures of the circumstances, if ever an individual could be excused for being irritable, it was Jesus. Yet in Mark 14:61, at His trial, we read that "He kept silent and answered nothing". Too often a sense of our own importance leads to irritability and a loss of self-control in our relationships with each other.

Love thinks no evil: can there be a more sublime example of this quality of love than in our blessed Lord Jesus, who on the cross would say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"? We also need a generosity of spirit that actively looks for good in others. It is said of Abraham Lincoln that "he never forgot a kindness, but that he had no room in his mind for the memory of a wrong".

Love does not rejoice in iniquity: love is not blind. In Matthew 21:12, we see Jesus driving out the moneychangers who had made the Temple no better than a den of thieves. Jesus never overlooked evil but always confronted it. However He never took any pleasure in the wrongdoing of others. Love leaves no room for joy in anything other than good. And yet La Rochefoucauld could say, "There is something not altogether disagreeable to us in the misfortunes of our friends". Love would crowd out this very human tendency.

Love rejoices in the truth: we should note the joy in the Lord's words as He celebrated the repentance of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:9. This is the exact opposite from the previous quality. Love is so active in taking joy in that which is good, that it finds no room for pleasure in that which is wrong.

Love bears all things: to the woman in John 8, Jesus could say, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more". Jesus would pay the penalty for her sin, and so would not condemn her as the others wanted to do. We read in 1 Peter 2:23, that "when He was reviled, did not revile in return".

Love believes all things: this is not a naive belief in what has been shown to be false. Rather there is no spirit of cynicism or suspicion about love. It always looks to put the best interpretation on something or someone. There is a spirit of trust in love. So Jesus could sleep soundly in the boat amidst the storm, confident in His Father's care (Luke 8:23).

Love hopes all things: even when belief has been misplaced, love hopes for a better future. As a father, the love I have for my children leads me to believe that they are honest. Even when I am disappointed in this, and they are caught red-handed telling lies, so love leads me to hope that they will learn from this and be more truthful in the future. This spirit was very much in evidence in Jesus' words to Peter, in Luke 22:32, "I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren".

Love endures all things: WG Scroggie wrote that "love bearing refers to its attitude when it does not receive what is due; love enduring refers to its attitude when it receives what is not due". Love will persevere, alone if necessary, with the goal always in sight. So Jesus could graciously restore Peter, having endured the bitter pain of denial, knowing how valuable a servant Peter would become.

Love never fails: in a society, where the marriage vows to love seem to mean so little, love stands out like a huge rock on a barren landscape. All else may move; love will not. How beautiful are the words of Jesus in John 13:1, "when Jesus knew that His hour had come... having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end". Because, when all is said and done, love does not depend on the object, only on the lover.

How far short I fall when compared to the One who so perfectly embodies all of these qualities of love. If, like Paul, we ask, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" we may be sure that part of the answer will be, "Love one another as I have loved you". Matthew Henry could write, "How lovely a thing would Christianity appear to the world if those who profess it were more animated by this divine principle, and paid a due regard to a command on which its blessed Author laid a chief stress".

A victorious love.

“But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.”

It is important to note the subtle changes in verse 8. Prophecies and knowledge are linked together and will fail or be done away. Tongues, on the other hand, will cease. Why is this distinction made? Clearly from verse 10, the timescale in view is that of present imperfection compared to future perfection. For the present, the gift of tongues may be necessary to spread the gospel, and teach His word. However, when we are in His presence there shall no longer be this need. So tongues shall cease. Prophecy and knowledge now is only partial. It is to be done away with. That is, it is not to cease. The idea that in heaven we shall all be in some zombie-like state finds no basis in the Bible. It is to be superseded however. Prophecy, the ability to speak the mind of God for the moment, will be an ability all share. Knowledge will be universal and complete. Paul then uses an example from human experience to confirm this. As a child, we babbled, our understanding was incomplete and our thoughts were simplistic. There is nothing wrong in this; it was right for the time, but it was childish. However by adulthood the babbling has stopped, to be replaced by language. There would be something grossly wrong if I continued to babble. However, what I learnt as a child I still know, but now that knowledge is more complete. As a child I knew the sky was blue, but now I know why. As a child I understood that fire hurt my fingers, but now I understand why it does so. In similar manner our reasoning matures into adulthood. I don't stop knowing what I knew as a child, but rather add to it more complex knowledge.

But there may also be another thought here that we tend to overlook. What I learn and do as a child prepares me for adulthood. Childish chatter and learning are an essential prerequisite for adult life. Imagine a child saying “childish things are silly, therefore I will not learn them. I will only start when I can understand them properly”. So, for years, it says or learns nothing. Would it then be able to become an adult in understanding, knowledge and language overnight on its eighteenth birthday? Of course not! Those self-same stages that all children go through in infancy would still be gone through, only now as an adult, and all would be shameful. So too, then, our spiritual experiences now of learning the Scriptures, and our struggles to understand them correctly, and then put them into practice are essential stages in our spiritual development. They fit us, to some extent, for the time when we shall reach maturity with our Lord Jesus in eternity. Those who through neglect and self-pleasing choose to remain spiritual children, will not overnight become spiritual giants in that future day.

But what a glorious hope is brought before the Christian here. There is a day coming, perhaps today, when we shall see our Saviour, the Lord Jesus, face to face. Could anything rival this for wonderful anticipation? No longer the feeble understanding of what we ought to do. No longer the contentions amongst believers that so spoil the Gospel. No longer the sin that distracts us from appreciating His Person. No, then we shall see Him face to face. Will we then see the scars on His brow, the nail prints in His hands, that mark the price of our salvation? John tells us what the outcome of this meeting will be in 1 John 3:2, “and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is”.

And so we come to the final verse of our chapter: “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love”. The Corinthian Christians believed that their gifts were of a lasting character. However, Paul points out that it is these three great virtues, faith, hope and love that will abide forever. So often Paul links these three qualities (see, for example, Romans 5:1-5, Colossians 1:4-5, 1 Thessalonians 1:3). They are united in leading a believer to a full relationship with Christ. Faith rests on the past; hope leans to the future and love guides the present. But all three remain and are eternal in character. In heaven we shall all be perfect, all eternal but that does not mean that we are in a fixed and final state of things. Faith, hope and love will still guide us to increased dependence on Him, to a fuller appreciation of who He is. Each believer according to their spiritual capacity shall be full, just as one star shines more brightly than another, but all shine as brightly as they can. And yet of these three wonderful, eternal virtues, love stands out as pre-eminent.

Firstly, this is because love is part of the very nature of God. God is not faith, nor is He hope, but God is love (1 John 4:8). As we express love, we display the divine nature that He alone has put into our hearts. Secondly, love is pre-eminent in that it is sacrificial. As we practise faith and hope, we do so for ourselves, although others may also be blessed indirectly. However, as we practise love, it is always others who are the beneficiaries. Faith and hope build us up as individuals. Love builds up others. Thirdly, love is the endpoint of itself. Faith and hope are helps to enable us to reach that goal. How wonderful a thing it would be if we could love now like Jesus did! To love in all its many facets, unconditionally, lavishly and sacrificially. As we do so, then we shall grow as individuals in our appreciation of Him. And as we do so, so too shall we grow as we lead others to Him and build up other believers. In all this His lovely Person will be glorified.

Lord Jesus, as we have looked at your lovely character this morning, we realise again how we love You. We love You because You first loved us. Help us to love one another, to love them because You do, and because this is what You have commanded us to do. Let Your love fill all we do and say and think in all situations, we pray, for Your glory. Amen.

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