

SUPREME PRIORITY

by Ray C. Stedman

Our theme this morning is love. We are looking at the most beautiful chapter in the whole New Testament, First Corinthians 13. This chapter is justly famous, not only for its majestic language, but for the lofty idealism of its subject matter and the very practical behavior it describes.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. {1 Cor 13:1-3 RSV}

Analyzing those words is almost like taking a beautiful flower and tearing it apart. But some analysis is necessary in order that we might fully grasp what the Apostle Paul is saying here in this great apostrophe to love.

There are three aspects of love which he considers in this brief chapter:

- First, the preeminence of love over everything else;
- Then the practice (in a very forthright and helpful way); and
- Then the permanence of love, the enduring quality of it.

We should remember that this chapter on love, though it is often read separately from the rest of the content, really fits beautifully with what the apostle has been talking about in the previous section. Beginning with Chapter 12 he introduced the subject of the spiritualities, the matters pertaining to the Spirit of God. The first part of that chapter was the focus of the Spirit on the Lordship of Christ. Jesus is Lord; this is always the emphasis of the Holy Spirit. He makes Christ real to us. If we have any sense at all of the reality and living presence of Christ it is because of the work of the Holy Spirit within. Then Paul talked about the gifts of the Spirit. We have been looking at how every believer is equipped with certain spiritual gifts that put him into the ministry. If you are not learning to use those gifts, you are going to sabotage the program of God as far as you are concerned. He has given them that you might have a ministry within the Body of Christ.

Now, here, in Chapter 13, we come to the fruit of the Spirit. The apostle has introduced it with a hint already that the fruit of the Spirit is far more important than the gifts of the Spirit. That we become loving people is far more important than whether we are active, busy people. Both are necessary, but one is greater than the other. Paul has said so: "I will show you a still more excellent way." That is the way of love.

I call this the "fruit of the Spirit" because in the letter to the Galatians, in the famous passage in Chapter 5, the apostle details for us what the fruit of the Spirit is. It is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, {cf, Gal 5:22-23}. It has been pointed out that all of those qualities really are manifestations of the first one, love -- that, after all,

- Joy is love enjoying itself;
- Peace is love resting;
- Patience is love waiting;
- Kindness is love reacting;
- Goodness is love choosing;
- Faithfulness is love keeping its word;
- Gentleness is love empathizing; and
- Self-control is love resisting temptation.

Love is the key; love is the main thing. This chapter, therefore, is setting forth that quality of love which is the

work of the Spirit of God within us reproducing the character of Christ. Now once you have love all these other qualities that are part of the fruit of the Spirit are possible to you. If we have the love of God in our hearts, then we can be patient; we can be peaceful; we can be good, loving, faithful, gentle, kind, and all these other qualities. But without love all we can do is imitate these qualities, and that is what produces a phony love. One of the most deadly enemies of the Christian cause is phony love. That is why, in Romans, Paul says, "Let love be genuine," {Rom 12:9a RSV}. When you come into the church, especially among the people of God, love must be genuine. If it is not, it is hypocrisy. If it is put on just for the moment, if it is an attempt to put on a facade, to act like you are kind, thoughtful, gracious, faithful, and so on, but it all disappears as soon as the situation changes, that spreads death within the whole community. Genuine love, however, will produce all these qualities.

The word "love," I will point out before we look at this, is not the Greek word *eros*. That word is used to describe erotic love, sensual love, what you feel when you "fall in love," a passionate attraction to another person. That kind of love is not even mentioned in the Word of God, strangely enough, though it is a common form of love today. And the word here is not *philia*, which means affection, friendship, a feeling of warmth toward someone else. This too is a universally distributed love, but this is not what is mentioned here. Paul is talking about *agape*, which is a commitment of the will to cherish and uphold another person. This is the word that is used about the love of God always. It is the only word ever used to describe his love. It is a word, therefore, addressed to the will. It is a decision that you make and a commitment that you have launched upon to treat another person with concern, with care, with thoughtfulness, and to work for his or her best interests. That is what love is, and this is what Paul is talking about.

Now this kind of love is possible only to those who first love God. I do not hesitate to say that. Any attempt to try to exercise love like this without having first loved God is to present a phony love, a fleshly kind of love. The reason I say that is because the Scripture tells us there are two great commandments. The first is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." The second one, Jesus said is, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," {cf, Matt 22:37-9, Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10:27}. We try to turn that around. Many of us are trying to love our neighbor, whoever he may be, in our family or anywhere else, without having loved God, and it is impossible to do that. It is "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit," as Romans puts it {cf, Rom 5:5}, that fulfills the definition that is given in this chapter, and only that love. Therefore, you cannot love other people until you first love God.

Love for God is not difficult, because all you need to do is be aware of how he has loved you -- in creation, in the supply of all you need, in leading and putting you in various places with various persons. But above all else he has loved you in having given his Son for you, having redeemed you, having forgiven you, having healed your inner hurt. Your loneliness, your guilt is taken away. By these means God has called you to himself and given you a standing before him as a son within his family. To remember all that is to be stirred with love for God. When you love God you awaken your capacity to love people. Therefore, it is very important that we understand, in reading this passage, what Paul has been reminding us of all through this letter, that love is a supernatural quality. God alone can give this kind of love. God alone can lead you to make a choice to love somebody who does not appeal to you, who does not awaken anything within you. Yet that is what God's love is. That is what is so desperately needed and so beautifully described in this passage. It can only come as we love God and love is awakened within us by the Holy Spirit.

Now remember, therefore, this chapter comes after Paul has said that all believers are baptized with the Holy Spirit, made a part of the Body of Christ -- all of them, without exception. As Jesus put it, we are "in him" by that process {cf, John 14:20b}. Then all believers have been filled with the Spirit, indwelt by the Spirit, "made to drink of one Spirit," {1 Cor 12:13b}. By that process our Lord's words, "I in you" {John 14:20c}, have been fulfilled. Because of that we all have the capacity to act in love. All that Paul is saying in this little passage is, "If you have that capacity then do it. Love one another."

To encourage this he shows us some of the qualities of love:

Number one, of course, is this preeminent value of love. What makes life worth living? Love does. Paul contrasts love here with certain things that were highly regarded in Corinth and are still highly regarded in the

world today. The first is the ability to communicate. These Corinthians valued communication. They enjoyed eloquence; they admired oratory. They were especially entranced by the gift of tongues, the ability to speak in languages that had never been learned, which had been given among them, but which by the power of the Spirit enabled person to pray and praise God. They were making much of this gift, as many are today, so Paul begins on that note. He says,

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. {1 Cor 13:1 RSV}

-- just a big noise maker, that is all. There is no suggestion in this that the gift of glossolalia -- which is speaking in tongues -- is identical to what Paul refers to as "the tongues of angels." I know people today who claim that the gift of tongues enables you to speak with the tongues of angels, but Paul does not say that at all. In fact, it is a pure, arbitrary assumption on the part of anybody that the gift of tongues constitutes the tongues of angels. Angels do communicate, but we do not know how. Nothing is said about it in the Bible. This is the only reference in all the Scriptures to the tongues of angels. All Paul is saying is that to be a loving person is more important than to be able to speak in all the languages of earth or heaven. Therefore, it is essential to learn to love. Communication without love is a useless thing.

Then he compares love to two other qualities that are admired both in Corinth and today in our age as well: Power to know and to do. He says:

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. {1 Cor 13:2 RSV}

-- absolutely nothing. Paul is thinking of theologians particularly, men and women with great ability to detect and understand the mysteries of the Scriptures, to unscrew the inscrutable, and to answer all Biblical questions, riddles and parables. Everywhere I go I am always asked some of the same questions:

- "Why doesn't God kill the devil?"
- "Where did Cain get his wife if he was the only person in the world?" (That seems to be a matter of concern to a lot of people.)
- "Why does God allow injustice, accidents and tragedies in our world?"

These are questions flung at every Bible teacher. Now, Paul says, "If I could answer all those questions, if I could explain all those mysterious movements of God and still was not a loving person, if I was difficult, cantankerous, hard to get along with, even though I could move mountains by faith, if I lacked a loving spirit, it is all nothing."

Finally, he takes up the matter of sacrificial zeal:

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. {1 Cor 13:3 RSV}

There are many reasons why people give away things. Sometimes they give because they are deeply concerned about certain cause or a need. They are willing to sacrifice their own possessions in order to meet that. But sometimes people give for very selfish reasons, although it appears to be a generous gift. I have known people who gave great sums of money to a cause they actually had no interest in at all, no more use for than a hog has for hip pockets, and still they gave their money. Why? Well, because they had a selfish interest in it. Now you can do that. You can give away everything. You can impress people with tremendous willingness on your part to sacrifice, even as some have done, as we read frequently, by pouring gasoline all over their bodies and setting themselves on fire to call attention to certain cause. That is happening more and more often these days. That is a supreme sacrifice, and surely it bears eloquent testimony to the fact that those who do so believe in the cause they are espousing. But to do that, Paul says, without having learned to love will gain nothing. At the judgment seat of Christ it is regarded as wasted effort. Love is the important thing. Nothing can underscore that fact more than these words. This is what life is all about. We are set here to learn to love, and to live

without learning to love is to have wasted our time, no matter how impressive our achievements in other ways may be.

In the next section the apostle goes on to show us that love must be practical. Love is not an ethereal thing; it is not just an ideal you talk about. It is something that takes on shoe leather and moves right down into the normal, ordinary pursuits and aspects of life. That is where love is to be manifest. Nothing is more helpful, in reading a chapter like this, than to ask yourself the question. "Am I growing in love? Looking back over a year, am I easier to live with now? Am I able to handle people more graciously, more courteously? Am I more compassionate, more patient?" These are the measurements of life. This is why we were given life, that we might learn how to act in love. Nothing else can be substituted for it. There is no use holding up any other quality we possess if we lack this one. It is the paramount goal of every human life, and it is well to measure yourself from time to time along that line.

To help us the apostle gives us some very practical ways of testing love. He says:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. {1 Cor 13:4-6 RSV}

Notice in that paragraph there are only three positives; all the rest are negatives. So love is really only three simple things, basically. It is patient, it is kind, and it is honest. It rejoices in the right. (The word really is "truth." It rejoices in the truth.) The quality of love we are talking about is that which produces patience, kindness and honesty. The negatives that are given here are associated with love in the apostles though -- because these are the things we must set aside in order to let the love of God, which is patient and kind and honest, manifest itself. We do not have to produce this love in the Christian life. We only have to get the things that are hindering it out of the way. Those are the negatives that are suggested here.

All progress in the Christian life comes by first experiencing the cross and then the resurrection. That is a symbolic picture of all we repeatedly go through as Christians. To give up the pleasure which these negative expressions give us is to experience a kind dying to self. That is the cross. But it always results in a resurrection, a release of the power of God to reach out in patience, in kindness, and in honesty. That is the way to love.

Many people admire this chapter on love but they do not understand how to produce this kind of love. The reason the apostle does not tell us here is because that is what he has been telling us all along through the whole book -- that God is ready to love through us if we are ready to renounce the false, the negative expression that we enjoy experiencing. I do not have to argue with you about that. We all know the perverse pleasure we get out of some of these negative qualities. We do not want to give them up. It is too much fun to rip people apart, give them a piece of your mind, make them suffer for all the injuries they have done to you; at least freeze them out; be silent toward them and let them stew a little bit in their own juice. You know how delightful that is, don't you? We want love, but first we want the flesh. That is why we do not experience the love of God. Therefore, we are given these negative qualities to help us to understand what we must renounce.

What are the things that keep us from being patient? (That word, by the way, is always used with regard to people, not circumstances.) This word always means being patient with people so that you do not immediately wipe them out, or turn them off, but you are understanding, you wait patiently and let them work things out. The word actually means "a great suffering," enduring some suffering in order to let people have a chance to work out their problem. That is patience. Kindness means courteousness, to be gracious, to be pleasant to people. That is what love is.

What are the things that stop that?

First on Paul's list is jealousy. We are often not patient or kind because we are jealous. We are spiteful and short with people because we see them enjoying something that we want. They have a relationship that we envy; they have a quality about themselves that we do not have and we are angry about it, so we are short and spiteful. That is one reason why we are not patient and kind.

Next on Paul's list is boastfulness: "Love is not jealous or boastful." Oftentimes we are not patient because we cannot wait to listen to others. We are so anxious to brag about ourselves so they can begin to admire us. But that must be surrendered for love to appear.

Then, Paul says, love "is not arrogant." Arrogance is disdain, lack of respect for another person, ignoring how he will feel and asserting yourself regardless of what the result may be. Nor is love "rude," Paul says. This is to ignore another's rights; literally, the term is, "to be puffed up." It means to be haughty, or cutting, sarcastic. One of the major expressions of rudeness is sarcasm.

And "love does not insist on its own way." It is not stubborn, intractable, inflexible, insisting that everybody else adjust. It is willing to find a way, to examine a matter, to look at it from a different angle. When we get stubborn and inflexible and refuse to even talk about a matter we are choosing to exercise the self-centeredness of the flesh. Therefore, we cannot allow the love and patience and kindness of God to appear in that situation.

Then love "is not irritable or resentful." Nothing destroys human relationships more than that. Henry Drummond, in his great little message on this passage, *The Greatest Thing in the World*, writes about this:

No form of vice, not worldliness, nor greed of gold, nor drunkenness itself does more to unChristianize society than evil temper. For embittering life, for breaking up communities, for destroying the most sacred relationships, for devastating homes, for withering up men and women, for taking the bloom off childhood, in short, for sheer gratuitous misery-producing power this influence stands alone.

Finally, love "does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right." Love is not gloating over other people's miseries. If somebody tells you he is sick and your feeling is, "Well, I hope it is nothing trivial," you may be clever but you are not exercising love. Love does not gloat over another's misfortune, but rejoices in honesty, in the truth, when it is brought out. Love is willing to hear even the truth about itself. It is not so concerned about being protected from hurt or injury as it is in knowing what is really happening -- what reality is. This is a great quality of true love.

Paul now gathers it all up with this beautiful expression,

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. {1 Cor 13:7 RSV}

Bears all things is literally "covers everything." Love covers. When it does learn something unpleasant about another it does not run and scatter it all over the neighborhood. It does not take delight in some of the misdeeds of others. Love covers it over, keeps it silent. Not that it will not do something about it, but it does not spread it about for others to hear.

Love "believes all things." That does not mean love is gullible, but some have read it that way. When Jesus was kissed by Judas in the garden he did not say to him, "Oh, Judas, what a beautiful kiss. I'm so glad you have changed your mind and are showing this." No, he understood that this was a traitorous action. He said to Judas, "Would you betray the Son of man with a kiss?" {Luke 22:48 RSV}. He was not gullible. He did not believe that action of Judas. Nevertheless, love is ready to believe anything that has a ground of reality to it. It is always ready to start over. What this phrase means is that it is ready to trust somebody anew. It does not assume the attitude, "Well you've done that three times before and you did not do it right so I'm not going to trust you anymore." If somebody wants another chance love grants it.

Then, third, love "hopes all things." No cause, no situation, no person is ever regarded as totally hopeless. There is always a place to begin again. Love will find it; it never gives up hope. Thus Paul adds the final word in this section, love "endures all things." Love never quits; it never gives up on anyone.

It has been pointed out that you could take this paragraph and insert "Jesus" in place of the word "love" and you would find that it fits perfectly:

"Jesus is patient and kind; Jesus is not jealous or boastful; he is not arrogant or rude; he does not insist on his

own way; he is not irritable or resentful; he does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Jesus bears all things; he believes all things; he hopes all things; he endures all things."

When you read it that way it is clearly evident that love is the character of Christ. That is what the Holy Spirit is seeking to reproduce in us, so that becoming Christlike means becoming a more loving person. This is the measure of our spiritual growth.

I know Christians who do not seem to have changed in twenty years. They are just as querulous and cantankerous and difficult twenty years after they became Christians than they were at the beginning. Something is wrong in a life like that.

The whole purpose and thrust of the work of the Spirit is to teach us to be loving, patient, kind, forgiving, understanding, giving others chance, trying over again, open to correction and instruction ourselves, easy to be entreated. These are all the qualities that can be produced in a Christian life. That is what makes life worth the living. This is the measure of true Christian spirituality.

Prayer

Lord, we pray that the gift of love may be manifest in our lives in our families in our homes that we may manifest this quality that you have brought into the world by the gift of redemption. We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

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