

LOVE NEVER QUILTS

by Ray C. Stedman

It will probably come as no surprise to you that I intend to speak on First Corinthians 13 this morning. We took the first seven verses of this great chapter last week, and I am not going to retrace my steps, but, beginning with Verse 8, will concentrate on the latter part of this passage.

In Houston these last couple of days I met with some twenty-two Christian men from all over the country who are very prominent in business. They were mostly young men, and, except for the five pastors present, everyone was wealthy. One morning we were discussing the subject of love and attempting various definitions of the particular form of love called *agape*, according to the teaching of the Word of God. One of these young men suggested this definition, which we felt was a good one: "*Agape*, or God's kind of love, is a deliberate choice to act for the best interests of another person." That is indeed true love. It is to put another's need and fulfillment ahead of your own, and to act deliberately to help to fulfill that need and that purpose. Paul makes clear here, however, that love has something more to it than that. I was a little disturbed with that definition because it seemed so cold. The apostle adds the element of warmth. He says that love is patient, kind, and truthful.

It is very difficult to combine truth and love. There is a passage in the letter to the Ephesians that has always intrigued me. In my judgment it constitutes the simplest, briefest, and yet the most profound definition of Christian maturity that I know anything about. I seek to measure myself against this, and I measure others as to whether they are mature or not in the degree to which they manifest this quality: It is in Paul's words there where he exhorts us to "speak the truth in love," {cf, Eph 4:15a }. Now it is hard to combine those two. It is easy to speak the truth sometimes, to be blunt and caustic and even embittered, and you can speak truth, but there is no love in it. Or you can be loving, as we think of it, and refuse to hurt another and never tell him anything that is unpleasant or distasteful. But that is a quality that really reveals a lack of courage; it is a form of deception. It is the man or woman who can learn to speak the truth in love who is growing up in Christ. That is what this chapter is describing for us.

We have already looked at Paul's great word about the preeminence of love, how it is of more value than everything else; and we have also looked at the practice of love, how it comes out in a practical way, both in the negative and the positive of it. Now, beginning in Verse 8, we have Paul's amplifying of the persistence of love, the permanence of it. It is all put in the opening words of Verse 8:

Love never ends; {1 Cor 13:8a RSV}

The various versions translate that in many ways. The reason is that the apostle has employed a very unusual Greek word here that is translated "ends" in the version I am using. It really means, "to fall." It says love never "falls." Now that sounds strange to our ears, but it is meant in the sense that love never falls away and disappears; it never quits; it is never used up; love keeps on coming; the more you use it the more there is. That is the point Paul is making here.

Many of you have discovered this. You begin to exercise this kind of love and you find yourself enabled to exercise it even more all the time; the more you give it away the more you seem to have. Love is like bailing out a boat with a hole in it -- the more water you throw out, the more there is; it just keeps coming in all the time. That is the thought behind this, "love never quits"; it never stops coming on. One of my favorite hymns ever since I was a young Christian has been, *O Love That Will Not Let Me Go*. That is the idea; love that persists despite all the rebuffs that it may experience.

Some years ago I spoke at a conference in North Carolina and shared the platform with a friend, Dr. Stephen Olford, who for many years was pastor of the large Calvary Baptist Church in Manhattan. Stephen is an Englishman, raised in the mission field in Africa, the son of missionary parents.

One morning he told us about his early boyhood. His father died when he was in Africa, and his mother took him back to England on a long 'tramp' steamer ride that took almost two weeks to reach London. They had not been out of port more than a few days when one of the seamen injured himself. His wound began to fester and to smell very badly, and the other seamen refused to have him in the cabin with them. They lacked adequate medicines to treat this man, and it looked like he was going to die. He was in great pain, but the other men took him up and dumped him on the deck, exposed him to the weather, and refused to let him come down at all. They passed food to him with a long pole, as no one would touch him.

Stephen Olford's mother was a godly, Christian woman, and, after about a day of this treatment, she took pity on this man and went up to him. No one else would draw near him because the stench was so terrible, but she took a basin of warm water, knelt down beside him, and washed away the pus and all the collected foul excrement of the wound. He cursed her, as he had cursed everybody who had come near him, but she patiently kept on and never said a word. She brought him his food that day, again in the evening, and again washed his wounds and took care of him. This went on for the duration of the voyage. When they arrived in London he was able to hobble off the ship. As you can well imagine, a display of love like that had broken through all this man's bitter defenses. He became a Christian and a lifelong love slave of Stephen Olford's mother.

I have never forgotten that story because it seems to illustrate so beautifully what Paul is talking about here: Love that will not quit, despite all the obstacles that stand in the way; love that refuses to give heed to what would turn off anything less, but keeps right on. God's love is like that, he says. It will never quit, even though for the best interest of another person it may temporarily turn its back, or appear to. God does this with us, as a mother eagle does with its young. To kick it out of the nest may look cruel, but the eagle knows that is the only way the young will learn to fly. It braves the wrath of its young in order to force it into maturity. Love will do that too: God's love will, and true love will, but even then it is hovering there, waiting and watching to see lest disaster strike, ready to help in time of need. This is surely what Paul is describing here.

He contrasts this quality of love with the things that will not last, the things that do quit, the things that pass away, in Verse 8:

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. {1 Cor 13:8 RSV}

Obviously he is comparing this now to the spiritual gifts. This is not knowledge in general or prophecy in general; this is the "gift of knowledge," the "gift of prophecy," the "gift of tongues" that he is talking about. These were the three favorite gifts at Corinth. They were making much of them in the church there, as many in the church today make much of them. Paul was telling them that, important and God-given as these gifts are, they were never intended to last in contrast to love, which never quits.

Prophecy is the gift of unveiling the mysteries of God, making known to man these radical secrets about humanity and society that are revealed in the Scripture which the secular world can never discover. It is not the gift of predicting the future so much as revealing the meaning of the present, and, therefore, of the future, because the present is always becoming the future and the future is becoming the present. This, therefore, is a great gift.

The gift of tongues is the gift of supernatural utterance of a language never learned in praise and thanksgiving to God. (We will see that more clearly in the next chapter.) It is called glossolalia, the ability to speak a language, a true language, that was never learned.

The gift of knowledge is the ability to grasp a great range of Biblical truth, to systematize it, and to know it, and it too is a great gift. But of the three, Paul says, tongues will absolutely cease. He uses a different word about tongues than he does for the others, as we will also see more clearly in the next chapter. This is because tongues is a "sign" gift, given as a sign to unbelievers, designed to arrest their attention. When that is accomplished there is no further need for the gift, so it ceases in the individual.

The other two gifts, prophesying and knowledge, will fade away gradually, Paul suggests. That is inherent in the word he employs. They are gradually being replaced by something else, which he calls the "perfect" thing. You will see how clear this is in Verses 9 and 10:

For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. {1 Cor 13:9-10 RSV}

Clearly that is a gradual process. Now, the question that it raises in our minds, of course, is, "What is this perfect thing which, gradually increasing in our life, replaces our concern about gifts?" I have been interested to see the many guesses the commentaries make about this.

Some of them suggest that the "perfect" thing here is the written Word of God. They tell us that here, in the 1st century, they did not have the New Testament as we have it. They relied upon the teaching of prophets, evangelists, apostles and others who spoke bits and pieces of the mind of God, but as the complete, written account of that mind of God took shape and form in the New Testament, all the need for these gifts would pass away. It is the claim of those who teach this that as the Word of God, as we think of it, came into being in the written New Testament, these gifts began to fade, so that all the gifts of prophesying and of tongues and of knowledge have all long since ceased and we are now shut up to the Word of God. Now, there are elements of truth in that, but that is not what this is referring to at all; that is to totally ignore the context in which this word "perfect" appears.

Others have suggested that what Paul is talking about is heaven. Heaven is the perfect place. Life is imperfect, and one of these days we will all fold our earthly tents, the wheels of earthly life will cease their turning, and we will go to heaven and then the "perfect" comes. Now, there are also strong elements of truth in that. (In fact, Paul is going to return to that theme a little bit later in the paragraph.) But, again, that is not what he means by the word "perfect" here at all.

If we take the passage in its full context, in relationship to all that he has said here and in the surrounding passages, it is clear that the word "perfect" refers to love. Love is that "perfect" thing, which, as it grows in our life, replaces our need for and concern with the gifts of the Spirit. We find ourselves growing up into that to which the gifts are designed to lead us, so, when the end begins to be accomplished, the means to that end are no longer as fully required. This is what Paul is saying, and it is confirmed by the illustration he employs in Verse 11, where he says:

**When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
{1 Cor 13:11a RSV}**

There is nothing wrong with that. Children are supposed to act like children; everybody expects them to, and it would be folly and a shame if they did not. Paul says he did when he was a child, but,

when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. {1 Cor 13:11b RSV}

Why? Well, because he had become a man. That is the end toward which a child always moves -- maturity -- and therefore these things were no longer needed. Now, what Paul is saying, of course, to these Corinthians (and to the Californians), is that the mark of maturity is the ability to love, to love the unlovely, the selfish, the distasteful, the ungrateful, and to not let that change your attitude or your actions toward them but to keep on working fully for their best interests. As the ability to do that increases in our life, it will replace all our childish concern about the gifts of the Spirit. To make much ado about gifts, as though they were the overall important thing that God wants to emphasize, is to be childish in our attitudes.

Have you ever watched children playing on Christmas morning after they had opened their gifts? Their minds are focused on all these new toys; there are so many of them they cannot take them all in; they are so excited about them. They always seem to want the one that somebody else has. They play with one for a few moments, cast it aside, and get another one until their brother or sister grabs the one they have just discarded. Then it seems to assume great importance in their eyes. They are back to grab it away, and pretty soon there is a squabble going on over gifts.

That is what happens in churches. To make so much over gifts as though they were the important thing is to miss the whole thrust of this passage on gifts. Gifts are designed to lead you to love; that is the whole point of it. Prophesying is to teach us in the revelation of the mystery of God that we have a power the world knows nothing of: It is called "resurrection power," the power to love as God loves, and that we can exercise it any time we choose to. We will not feel it ahead of time; it does not surge up into our being to remind us that it is there waiting. We make the decision only because we ought to, that is all, in obedience to God. But when we choose to, and begin to, the power is supplied to us. That is what prophesying teaches us; this remarkable element of truth is that we have a new secret revealed, the power to love.

The gift of knowledge is to help us systematize truth so that we can instruct and help others in these great facts, and that is the action of love.

The gift of languages, the gift of tongues, is given to arrest the attention of unbelievers (Paul specifically says that in the next chapter), so that they will give heed to the magnificences of God as they did on the Day of Pentecost when they heard 120 different people speaking in languages. What were they doing with those languages? Preaching the gospel? No. They were praising God. That arrested the attention of this secular crowd, and they began to listen, and take heed to the fact that God was at work. Now that is the gift of tongues. That is an action of love, and it is designed to lead to love.

To focus on gifts and forget the end to which they lead is foolish and hurtful and destructive. To squabble over them is the utmost in folly in a church. Gifts are good, but they are passing away. What we ought to be writing books about, and issuing magazines over, and broadcasting over the radio and television today is the ability to love, to reach out to the hurtful and to minister to them.

I get so sick and tired, I will be honest with you, with all the demands and requests of what I think of as phony Christian broadcasts today. They are bleeding the people of God to support spectacular showmanship going on in the Christian world and wasting all their time, money and effort instead of learning the simplicity and the grass roots process of loving your neighbor as yourself.

In Houston last week we had a man who has a gift of seeing through to the heart of things. (It is really the gift of discerning spirits.) He was telling us about having received a letter recently from a large international radio broadcast seeking support from Christians for their broadcasting. They sent out a letter, the kind that is double-spaced, every sentence is a paragraph, and they underline part of it, etc., and you know they all have the same advertising firm (you can always tell them this way.) The appeal of the letter was that God cannot be out-given, that if you give to God, he will give back to you. They announced that they needed a certain tremendous sum of money to maintain their broadcast. They had figured the number of their listening audience and they said in the letter that, if every person who heard their broadcasts would send in \$76, this need would be met. Furthermore, they would guarantee, on the principle that God cannot be out-given, that he would find a way to give that \$76 back three times over. This was, therefore, the appeal of the letter: Send us the \$76 and God will give it back to you; just watch how he does it.

Well, this man in Houston said he wrote a letter back and said, "Sir, I believe what you have written; I believe it is true that God cannot be out-given; and I believe you have a tremendous need for funds. But I would like to suggest that you send me the \$76 and God will give it back to you three times over. You can get rid of your debt a lot faster that way." Now, I think that is the way to answer a letter like that. The quality of Christianity does not lie in its showmanship (how we need to get away from that), but in its ability to love, to love the hurting, the weak and the foolish.

Love then is the "perfect" thing, and, Paul says, one day it will be perfectly ours. Verse 12:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. {1 Cor 13:12 RSV}

Clearly here he is anticipating the end of life, the dawning of a new day when the morning will break and every shadow will flee away; all the imperfection of life will come to an end, and love will stand face to face with

love. Now, he says, it is like looking in a mirror dimly. He is talking about the way we are able to love. These ancient mirrors were not like the silvered glass ones we have today that give a clear and beautiful image, as they did not understand that process then. Their mirrors were simply highly polished metal, so that, when you looked in them, all you got was a rather indistinct, blurred image. This is a beautiful symbol for life: Paul says that is the way we love today.

We sometimes try to visualize the face of Jesus, but I think it is instructive that the Spirit of God has never given us a physical description of him. I do not like pictures of Jesus because, to me, they distract from what the Spirit is trying to impart, which is the true beauty of his being, his life, his character. Others may be helped by pictures; I do not fault them for that. Paul says our efforts to visualize and to sense the personality and the glory of Jesus are imperfect now, as we do not see him very clearly. But one of these days all those barriers will fade away, the mist will be dissolved, and we will suddenly find ourselves face to face with the Lord Jesus.

The disciples experienced a little of this on the Day of Pentecost. In the Upper Room, the Lord had said to them, "It is to your advantage that I go away," {John 16:7 RSV}. They looked at him with unbelieving eyes. They must have been thinking in their hearts. "How could that be? To lose you, to lose our chief treasure is to leave life empty and meaningless, dull and dreary. We can hardly stand the thought of it. Are you telling us that it is to our advantage that you go away? How could that be?" But on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit came to reveal Christ to them, they understood what he meant because suddenly all the questions they had been asking, all the doubts they had felt were resolved. An inner confidence sprang up within them that he was alive, and with them. They understood what he had said; words that they had been puzzling over, that had raised endless doubts and misconceptions in their minds, were suddenly clear and striking and startling. Now, that was just a foretaste of what is going to happen on the day when we stand in the presence of Jesus.

Paul suggests that will happen with our knowledge as well. There in the group in Houston we tried to grasp the way God works in history. We tried to understand what he is doing with the events that fill our newspapers. We asked ourselves, not what economic impact a certain event will have, but, "Why did God allow it to happen?" As we faced that question, we found ourselves able to see only very dimly, only to get blurred and incomplete images of what God was doing; little glimpses, fragments of insight perhaps, but nothing very clear. But, one of these days, Paul says, we shall be understood; we shall know him as fully as he now knows us. All our questions will be answered; all our problems will be resolved.

So, in his final summary, Paul gathers it all up in the things that abide:

So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. {1 Cor 13:13 RSV}

Faith abides because faith is a human response to a divine provision. Faith is doing something with what God has given you, and that is going to go on through all eternity. We lack everything; we human beings have nothing in ourselves. We are constantly taking wisdom, power, instruction and ability from the hand of God. Everyone is, whether he knows it or not. There is no ability to function as a human being without the gift of God to you first. Faith is a simple, deliberate response to the provision of God, therefore it abides, because we will go on doing that throughout eternity.

Hope abides because hope is the expectation of yet more to come. There is a phrase earlier in this letter where Paul speaks of "the things God has prepared for those who love him," {cf, 1 Cor 2:9b RSV}. We are beginning to dabble in the shallows of that now; we have found a few of those things already, but that is an infinite number, and finiteness can never encompass infinity. God, therefore, is going to keep on opening our eyes to new vistas, opening our spirits to new opportunities, to new adventures of faith. It will never grow old; it will never get less; it will go on forever and ever because he is infinite. Hope, therefore, abides.

But love abides too, and the reason love is the greatest is because God is love. God is not faith; God is not hope; but God is love. Therefore, to learn to love is to achieve the absolute, paramount value of the entire universe -- to become like God. That is what it is all about, isn't it? The lie of the devil in the Garden of Eden was, if you disobey God you will be like God; you will learn how to have a fulfilled life. That lie and its sad

results are visible all around us, in our own lives and in the world today. But the Word of God says to trust him, to follow him. To use what he gives you is one day to discover that the clouds pass away, the mists all melt and the morning breaks, the shadows flee, and you are face to face with him and you are like him. When we see him "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is," {1 Jn 3:2}. Therefore, love abides -- and "the greatest of these is love."

Paul really concludes this section with the opening words of Chapter 14. Therefore,

Make love your aim, {1 Cor 14:1a RSV}

The word is *pursue* it; set your heart on it; make it your chief goal; work at it; think about it; aim toward it; follow it; pursue it. That is the idea; that is what life is all about. To become a loving, compassionate, patient, kind, truthful person is the reason we exist. Everything else must either minister to us to that end, or be regarded as useless and wasted time.

May God help us to hold this clearly in our minds and understand the reality of these words, "the greatest of these is love."

Prayer

Lord, we feel so incapable of manifesting this quality of life, and yet your Word assures us that *that* is what was intended. We do not have this ability in ourselves, but we have it supplied to us in unending quantity if we but choose to use it. Help us to make that our goal. Beginning the rest of today, and all of next week, and for the rest of our lives, we will "owe no man anything, but to love one another." In Jesus' name, Amen.

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