

Corinthians - the Most Excellent Way (2)

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of love in the Christian life, and how it is the key to unity and harmony in the church.

Duration: 1:00:25

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 13:34, Romans 12:9, 1 Corinthians 12:31 - 13:1, Galatians 5:22-23, 1 John 4:7

Topics: "Love"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the importance of love in the Christian life. He emphasizes that love is a more excellent way than desiring after the best gifts. Without love, the diversity of the Spirit's gifts cannot be enjoyed without impairing the unity of the church. The preacher then delves into an examination of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, where Paul explains the significance of love. He concludes by stating that faith, hope, and love are essential, but love is the greatest of these.

Transcript

It's good to see you all this evening following a very lovely day which the Lord has given to us. May it please him to shine again upon us in the evening hour out of his tabernacle, even the tabernacle of his Word and by his Spirit. Mr. Schaff and I, you will appreciate, have been meditating quite a lot in 1 Corinthians 12 of late and have been trying to expound that mammoth chapter over a period of time.

We became very convinced that we should not end with the last verse in chapter 12, but that we should go on to chapter 13 of this great chapter and see how Paul says that love really is the key to everything in the Christian life. And so we have chosen to preach a series of three on this great chapter. One has gone and the other is to come tonight and then there will be a final one later on.

Shall we turn now to read 1 Corinthians 13 and tonight I would like to read it from the old King James version, familiar to many of you and much loved. I see some of you smiling with gratitude that I mentioned the King James. Well, all right.

There's something very stately about it and magnificent. Let us hear the Word of God. We begin, of course, with the last verse of chapter 12.

Covet earnestly the best gifts, and yet I show unto you a more excellent way. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not, and I shall use the word love instead of charity, and have not

love, I am become as sounding grass and the tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and 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 and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long and is kind. Love envieth not.

Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, does not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth. But whether there be prophecies, they shall fail.

Whether there be tongues, they shall cease. Whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake 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 through a glass, darkly, but then face to face.

Now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three. But the greatest of these is love.

May the God of this word, who gave it to us, now by the Holy Spirit enable us to come to profit from its precepts. As we turn particularly to verses four to seven in this delightful chapter. Now there are some parts of Scripture, they're like high peaks of Mount Everest.

They almost defy anyone to climb them. They climb so high into the heights of heaven. And I feel that this chapter is one of them.

You may read it quickly through, and you may say that you can plumb the depths of it. But you may pause and pray and ask for greater light, and you will find that the first time you scarcely saw the part. And there are ever new vistas of truth that come before the trusting soul that dares believingly and patiently to dig into this chapter.

Now last time, as we've already indicated, we stressed the fact that this chapter must be seen in its context. That is, it was written by the Apostle Paul to a special people in a special situation. In short, and this is a summary not adequate by any means, but I trust it brings out the salient points, this epistle was written by the Apostle Paul to a church that was greatly enriched by the grace of God.

Because God is a God of grace, He had given them His salvation. And with His salvation, He had given them gifts of the Spirit galore. They were enriched, according to the Apostle's statement in the very opening chapter, with all spiritual gifts, all kinds of gifts.

And those gifts were exercised by them in one way or another. Not only that, among all the other gifts, they had particularly a gift of knowledge. And they were able to communicate the gospel, it seems, with some considerable success.

But even so, there were problems here. And we meet these problems very early in the epistle. There were divisions.

There were little groups in the church that tended to become exclusive. I belong to Paul, says one little group. I belong to Apollos, says another little group.

I belong to Cephas, says a third. And then the elite, the really exclusive little group, well, I belong to Jesus, the Jesus group, excluding Paul and Apollos and Cephas and all else alike. Along with this, there were other problems.

There were moral problems. There were some things going on in the lives of some Christian people in the church of Corinth that did not take place, or that was frowned upon in the most immoral community of Corinth outside the church. And then there were other things.

There were all kinds of things that went on here, moral aberrations of various kinds, so that the apostle is addressing himself to that situation. Now, in 1 Corinthians 12, he has been concerned, to remind them, that the church is one body, one whole, and every member belongs to one another as the members of the body belong to the one body. But within that one body, there is a multiplicity of several members, a multiplicity of members, and varied, I should say.

Tragedy was in Corinth, however, that some folk believed that they had gifts which were far superior than those given to others. And so you had one segment of the community with a superiority complex. They felt that really they, they had, having a particular gift, had really the most important thing that God could give, and others were second-class citizens.

The other side of the coin is this. There were some in Corinth who felt that they were second-class citizens, and their gifts were second-rate, because they didn't have what they deemed in their folly to be far, far more important than the gift God had given them. And so you have all kinds of issues here.

People unable to get on with one another. People unable to see the beauty and the unity of divine truth. And people unable to see the unity of the body, whilst recognizing the multiplicity of the gifts given to the church.

Now what's the answer to that? Well, it would seem to me that putting it in a capsule, Paul is telling us in chapter 13 that the answer to that is, is simple in one sense. It is really that we should give priority of, in terms of time and effort, not to seek the gifts that God has given, though he tells us to seek the best gifts. But the most excellent way, a way that is better than the best according to Paul, that's how he puts it, is that we should seek to cultivate this that he calls agape, this amazing thing which we speak of as the love of God.

Now last time we stressed one main thread as running through verses 1 to 3. Here it is, without love the gifts of the Spirit lose their value. This is why it requires priority according to the first three verses. Without love, without agape, all the gifts lose their value.

Now someone has stressed it in this way. If you've got your Bible in front of you, someone has added up what we're told in verses 1 to 3 in this way, that the possession of all the gifts come to noise plus nothing, plus nothing. If you haven't got love, you tell me how on earth do you get that sum? Well look, if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am what? A noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, somebody that makes nothing but noise.

Tongues of men and tongues of angels simply make me a noisy person if I haven't got love. Look at verse 2, and if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith so that I can remove mountains but have not love, I am what? Nothing. Nothing.

Not something, but nothing. Now that takes some taking in, it takes some digesting. I've got faith that I can remove mountains, I've got understanding and prophetic powers already, I've got so many gifts and I can use them.

But I'm nothing, says Paul, if I haven't got love. The sum total of what I have is nothing, not zero. And then he goes on, if I give away all that I have and if I deliver my body to be burned but have not love, he repeats, I am nothing.

So whoever is responsible for striking this sum total of verses 1 to 3, he's pretty near the mark. What Paul is saying is this, you can have all the gifts, but if you haven't got love, then you've got in the end nothing but noise plus nothing plus nothing. In other words, what gives the gifts of the Spirit of God their value and their significance and enables them to fulfill the divine function in any church is this thing that is called agape.

And if this is not present, then however many your gifts, probably the more you have and the more a congregation has, the more the trouble. Likewise. But now we move to verses 4 to 7. Paul demonstrates why love is so crucial, that's what he's doing again.

And here in these verses, what he seeks to do is this, the pursuit and promotion of love is a more excellent way than that of one's ardent desiring after the best gift, says Paul, because only with love, only with love, is the diversity of the Spirit's gifts to be enjoyed without impairing the church's unity. Basically the same theme as in the first three verses, but getting deeper into it. It all mounts up to nothing without love in verse 3, in verses 1 to 3. Now in verses 4 to 7, what he says is this, look, it is only by having love that you can have the multiplicity of your gifts, all functioning without harming the unity of the body, and all growing in grace in the knowledge of our Lord and in the service of his kingdom.

Now that being so, we come to an examination of what he has to say in verses 4 to 7. It's a very challenging passage. I don't know whether every other preacher of the gospel, and there are some of them here tonight, I don't know whether you all have felt as I have felt in looking into this mirror, that you can hardly honestly face a single statement here without being convicted of sin and inadequacy. Why is love the answer? Because of what it is.

Why is it that without love you may have all the gifts in a congregation and that congregation goes to pieces, and you have immorality brewing and you have divisions growing? Why? Because of what love is and therefore does. Well, what is it and what does it do? Well, Paul passes it, as it were, through the prism, and he lets us see what happens, and he gives us to examine with him the various hues of agape having passed it through the prism as presented here in this chapter. He brings out then in consequence a number of doublets.

He doesn't do so consistently, but generally he makes two statements together, sometimes three, sometimes one, but generally two by two. And we're going to examine them rather prosaically tonight, but I trust nonetheless profitably. Now, what is love that is so important? What is there about it? Well, says Paul, and I'm taking the revised standard version as the basis of my study now, love in the first place, he says in the first part of verse four, is patient and kind.

In the King James Version, the translation is, love suffereth long and is kind. Love is here personified and envisaged as facing unsolicited circumstances, problems, difficulties. Whatever the nature of the human opposition or persecution encountered, however, love's negative attitude is that of patience.

It suffers long. Do you find it difficult to put up with people, especially people that oppose you? You know why? It's because we haven't got this love as we might and ought to have it. It isn't flourishing in the garden of our hearts as it ought.

Obviously, the apostle would have us realize from the outset that love of the quality he is enunciating is agape. Now, let's remind ourselves of that without taking any time to stress it at this point. It's a divine phenomenon.

It's the very love of God in our hearts, this love that he's talking about is not the kind of thing that is sung about sentimentally in our day and age. This is the very love of God in the hearts of men. It's imported into this world.

It doesn't grow here. Now, wherever you see agape, wherever you see love at work, you may be sure of this. God hasn't simply given that person something, but God is dwelling in that person.

Agape is not like a gift that has been given and sent to us in a parcel from heaven, you know, as distinct from God himself. Far too often do we think of the gifts, the gift of eternal life, as a kind of gift packed up in a parcel and sent from heaven, sent by God, posted by him, and it arrives, and we receive it. Eternal life is not that.

Eternal life is God giving us himself. And wherever you see agape, it doesn't simply mean that God has given that person the gift of agape. God is at work.

God is in that person, loving in him and through him or her. God is at work. And when you see this patience and this kindness emerging, it simply means that God's Holy Spirit is there alive, living, living his own divine life.

And this, of course, is the secret. It is the very life of God in the soul of man manifesting itself in love, love that is patient, and love that is kind. Patience.

The Seraphic preacher of the fourth century, was it not, John Chrysostom, insists that the word here, the word that we encounter here, not only presupposes that the person has been bitterly wronged, and he is patient in the face of being wronged, but the person who has been wronged has the capacity to retaliate if he wants to. He could retaliate, but he doesn't, you see. And this is patience.

You hit me on my cheek, and I happen to be, to have strong biceps, and I can hit you back if I want to, and I've got the power and I've got the ability, but I, but I, but I hold myself in check. That's patience. It's suffering long when I can retaliate.

Some writer that I've read, I don't remember who it is, illustrates this divine grace by reference to Abram Lincoln's long suffering with Edwin Stanton, whom Lincoln actually made his war minister. Stanton literally hated Lincoln, as many of you will know, and abused him well beyond the bounds of propriety. Disparagingly, he would refer to the president as, and I quote, the original guerrilla, unquote, or again as, to quote, a low cunning clown, unquote.

And yet Abram Lincoln apparently never made the least attempt to say anything in defense of himself, not a word. On the contrary, when the occasion emerged, he made this man his war minister, and when asked by a friend why, he said, he's the best man for the job. You see the point? He had the capacity to retaliate, but he didn't use it.

Suffer as long. Love holds anger in check, and holds power in check, and does not retaliate, even when it can. Love's negative restraint under provocation is more than matched, however, by its positive expression of what is spoken of here as kindness.

It returns positive kindness for undeserved cruelty. You see it, of course, exemplified most significantly, most especially and uniquely, in our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ walked untiringly, unceasingly among men throughout all his earthly life, especially from his baptism to the very end of his earthly pilgrimage, doing good, as we are told in the Gospels.

He went about doing good, and you know what he did. He was concerned about people's ailments, and loneliness, and predicaments, and sin, and all their problems. And he healed the sick, exercised the demons, even raised some of their dead.

But the point is this, he did this over, and over, and over again in societies that he knew would do nothing but denounce him and reject him. He did this kind of thing in Capernaum. He did this kind of thing in Jerusalem.

Irrespective of men's deserts, he went on heaping kindness, heaping mercy, opening his big heart and his large full hands of mercy, and scattering kindness wherever he went, right up to the cross. When having been there nailed on that center cross on Golgotha's brow, he cried for those that had nailed him there, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. You see, he pours out kindness in response for the cruelty and the viciousness that nailed him on the tree.

Now this is what Paul is talking about. Now you see, if you've got this in a church, you won't have divisions. And if you've got this in a church, no one person will be looking down over his nose at somebody else and thinking of him as inferior.

Neither will anyone need to look up and thinking that somebody else is so far superior to me that God has left me out. If you have love in your heart, you know that God has given you his best. Move on.

The second part of verse four. Love is not jealous or boastful. The Corinthians could not have other than smarted under this exposition of love, even, even if it were to end right here.

A little of this quality of love would have gendered kindness in place of the impatience and selfishness that they show in their attitude, the one toward the other. It would have smitten their jealousies and boastfulness to a withering death. The word for jealous here is a very strong one.

Love is not jealous. This is a negative statement. Not jealous nor boastful.

The word for jealous is one which has at its heart the thought of a sizzling flame, like a jet that has been turned up too high and it just sizzles. You can hear it. So that you have various translations of this that are very suggestive.

One translation goes, love never boils over with jealousy. You have this concept, you see, jealousy boils over. You never know what the jealous man is going to do.

He tends to sizzle and to boil. Jealousy is like a furiously sizzling flame or a boiling pan and it is menacing and it is dangerous. But love defuses it all.

Not that love is a mere negative quality as we have seen already and shall continue to note more and more as we proceed. But it does take the heat out of this deadly thing called jealousy. If you are jealous of somebody, can you hear these groups in current, one arguing against the other.

I'm of Paul, I'm of Apollos, I'm of Cephas, I'm of Jesus. You see, it's all petty jealousies. They're all reflected there.

If there was just one ounce of agape there, it would turn the heat off. You see, this is what love does. You can well imagine the situation envisaged by this statement.

In our world today, you may have somebody in work, somebody that's been there quite as long as you have, and yet he's passing you on the promotion scale and you're being left behind. And you know how you're tempted to feel. Oh, how easy it is to breed resentment and jealousy to a boiling point and oftentimes to explode.

Why this? Why that? But my dear friend, there is one answer to it as far as God is concerned. And here it is found. It's in this one beautiful word, agape, the gift of God, the work of the Spirit.

But Paul goes further. Then he envisages the situation in which the boot is on the other foot. Oh my, the thought that has gone into this, into this 13th chapter.

The boot is now exactly on the other foot. Instead of being poor and needy whilst others are prosperous, Paul next contemplates the opposite situation in which a man or a woman with love in his or her heart has reached the top of the of the ladder, the academic ladder if you like, or has made his financial fortune, or has become the idol of the community. What difference does love make now? For one thing it keeps him from boasting.

Love is Moffat's translation of this. Love makes no parade. You've come to the top of the ladder, but no one would know it, because love doesn't boast.

It doesn't talk about it. It doesn't brag. Love of the order described here by the Apostle, love which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit of God in the hearts of men, slays jealousy toward those above us, whilst it also counters all boastfulness before those who may be jealous of our successes.

Love enables us to be rightly attuned to our superiors and those that are ahead of us, and to those who according to the world are not our superiors, but are under us. Love enables us to be rightly attuned on all sides, toward the one group and toward the other. In other words, it's the key to good relationships.

And don't you and I know this. Let's hurry on to the next. Look at verse 5, the beginning of verse 5. Here again you have a doublet.

Love is not arrogant or rude, is the RSA. Is not arrogant or rude. Relationships again, you see.

There's nothing to spoil a relationship like this if you're arrogant or if you're rude. Insofar as this couplet takes us into a new area from the last couplet, in the second half of verse 4, love is not jealous or boastful. This reference to arrogance and rudeness probably has its emphasis more on the attitude towards people's persons than their possessions.

See, we're jealous of people because of their possessions, and we boast because of our possessions or position. But we are arrogant towards a person. And here in verse 5, the first part of verse 5, Paul is thinking very especially of the right attitude towards people's persons.

Jealousy and boasting were probably both thought of in relation to people's possessions, but these two in relation to their persons. Sometimes it is a sense of inferiority in ourselves that is responsible for our arrogance, and we become proud. We put airs on.

We are queer creatures. Believing ourselves to be inferior, we act as if we were superior. To people whom we rightly or wrongly believe to be our superiors, we tend to put on airs and inflate ourselves with thoughts that we are every bit as good or as wise or as capable as they are.

The Corinthians found this to be one of their besetting sins. So it would seem from a number of illustrations from the epistle, pride puffed them up. Paul tells them that pride puffs up, love builds up, he says in one of these chapters.

Pride and the knowledge which has pride of its heart, is knowledge that puffs up only, it just gives you airs. But love is not like that. Love is not arrogant.

Love is not something that is puffed up. You can't puff it up. It has no pleasure in detracting from someone else's glory by assuming that you are really as good as he is.

Love never wants to detract from somebody else's stature. It doesn't want to do that. It doesn't want to get up at the expense of somebody else.

It's prepared to take the very lowest place. Now this is very difficult. Somewhere I have read, I don't remember whether it's one of the commentators or not, but I have recently in this connection read a reference to William Carey.

And I think it's a very telling one and certainly applies in this context. You remember that Carey was a humble cobbler by trade, but God saved him and called him to be his servant, to send him abroad with a word of the gospel. Many were the gifts with which he was divinely endowed for the task to which he had been called.

Many indeed. But Carey was as humble as a man would be with the love of God over flooding his soul, with the fruit of the Spirit blossoming in him. He was not puffed up.

Now linguistically he was especially, singularly blessed. And some of you will know that he had been able to translate parts of scripture into 34 different languages. Now that is no mean feat for any man.

Yet he could bear others to speak disparagingly of him and do so with grace. And there is an occasion when a certain man who's entitled Lord so-and-so, I won't give you his name, well there's nothing very lordly about him, but he was talking with Carey one evening and in a loud voice he was overheard say to Carey, I suppose Mr. Carey you once worked as a shoemaker. No, no, no your lordship replied the

gracious Carey giving him his due title.

No, no, no he says your lordship. Not a shoemaker he says only a cobbler. He said what's the difference between a shoemaker and a cobbler? Well to be a shoemaker takes you up the ladder.

You're making shoes, but when you cobble them you only patch them up. Do you see the point? He didn't want to close the differential gap between him and this other man. If he is a lord in the true sense let him have his lordship.

I don't want to bring him down in any way at all because he loved the man. You see love can dare to take the lowest place and without love it just can't be done. Neither is it rude.

We are generally rude in relation to those whom we rightly or wrongly consider to be our inferiors. Now this is an unsavory thing, but it happens that we think of some people as our inferiors. May God save us increasingly from this.

This is an unseemly attitude as the word implies. It bears the marks of ugliness however you look at it. Where pride makes us boastful to some, it will not be long before it makes us rude to others.

But love is not rude and if you're rude my friend and crude it means you haven't got agape flooding your heart. Love is courteous for it has due respect for people as people and for people as God's creatures and over and above all else it has respect for the God who made man and who made all things. Not that love's courtesy is simply a matter of etiquette, of being proper and of doing what is expected of one in a given situation.

Far, far from that. On the contrary the courtesy which love shows is an attitude that springs from the depths of the heart. It is the expression of a quality of life that is deep and divine.

It is the life of God. It is the fruit of the Spirit. It is the Spirit living out the divine life within us.

See the life that we are describing here, the life of love is not the life of the natural man. But every phase and every facet of this thing called agape, this quality called agape, it's divine, it's important, it's from above, it's not from beneath, it's not from Adam, it's from God. And you see to have this kind of thing where people have a tendency to quarrel and go into groups and be exclusive and exclude so many, you know, this is the one thing that bridges the gulf between everybody.

This is the one thing that is necessary. It'll bring people together rather than send them apart. Love binds where you see people loving, you'll see them holding hands and clinging to one another's arms and putting their arms around one another.

That's the way that love does. It doesn't push people away, it draws people near. Come to the next, the second part of verse 5. Love does not insist on its own way.

Now this gets under the skin doesn't it? It does, it is not irritable or resentful. Now here is a triad not a doublet. Love is the very enemy of selfishness.

The deeper you penetrate into the mystery of agape, the more you will be impressed by its sheer selflessness. Its center of gravity is not self but God. And because of that it is more concerned with God's will and God's glory than with our own pleasure or glory.

Self-interest withers and wilts in the climate of love. Love does not insist on its own way. And when a man who's got a will, who's got his choice, who wants to do something will yield his will.

It means that he is crucifying himself. You can only do that to God's glory when you have love. This is a tremendously challenging statement in the day when men will go to almost any lengths to get what they deem to call their rights.

In these days we have such great expectations for ourselves. We're almost born with these great high expectations as if the world owes us this and owes us that. And we expect the world to turn up with the good.

And won't betide the world if it doesn't. We'll go to pieces. And the world will go to pieces as far as we are concerned.

But you see love's goal is not self. Love's goal is God and beyond God his will and those whom he loves. Self has been dethroned in principle and is being constantly robbed of its capacity to practice.

Where love is you don't find irritability and resentment. Perhaps the King James Version rendering is not easily provoked is the best at this point because it it appears to bring out the thought of the underlying Greek verb be irritable. That's what the RSV translates it and brings it out with greater force and clarity.

You see at the heart of the verb here there is the notion of a paroxysm a fit of rage. In fact the English word paroxysm is a transliteration of the Greek word that we have here. The thought would thus appear to be that love never flies off in a fit of temper.

Or as the New English Bible translates it not easily sorry not he's not quick to take offence. Or as J.B. Phillips puts it better still is not touchy. You know there are some people you can't touch or they get angry.

Love is not touchy. You can see the natural almost inevitable development of Paul's thoughts here. Since it is of the essence of love to be outgoing to be more concerned for God's glory and others good than for one's own affairs.

It is not so easily excitable when one's own wishes are crossed. One's own advice is disregarded or one's own cherished plans brought to naught. What if my plans are brought to naught? I have no right to have my own plans passed irrespective.

That's how love speaks. For the very same reason love is not resentful. It doesn't pout.

It no more harbors resentment in its bosom than it flares up with immediate passion and temper when it is crossed. It thinketh no evil in the sense that it does not keep accounts of wrongs allegedly received with a view to getting one's revenge at the future debt. If you write into your diary the alleged wrongs of other people my friend you can be sure that the flower of Agathe is not flourishing in your heart.

Shall we hurry to the next one and we probably ought to leave it there tonight. In verse 6 we read, Love does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. That there is joy and rejoicing where love is, is taken as axiomatic.

And I'm not going to say anything about that. Ultimately I don't suppose you can ever have real joy without real love. It is only to the measure, in the measure that we know something of Agathe that we can have joy in the midst of a world such as this.

However, that's another subject. Love does not rejoice at wrong. It has no malicious pleasure in a bad report about anyone, not even about a pledged whole.

Somebody's done the wrong thing to my enemy. I've got an enemy. This is all imaginary.

Say I've got an enemy. He's the most difficult character I've ever known. He may be a neighbor, may be anybody within the family perhaps.

But he's pledged to have my blood. And I hear that he's had a bad accident in a car. Hardly likely to get over it.

How do I feel? Well if I have Agathe in my heart, I shall not be pleased. Even though he's my bitterest foe, love doesn't rejoice in things like that. Love rejoices not at wrong in that sense.

This is one reason you see why love's ears are always closed to gossip. And her lips find it hard to repeat evil of others. Iniquity in its origins, its execution and consequences will bring pain to the loving heart.

Love's rejoicing begins, however, as the truth is told. Love rejoices in the truth. Literally, love rejoices along with the truth.

The notion here is that they sing a duet. They sing together, they rejoice together, love and truth together. When truth is having its way, and truth is having its fling, and truth is having its glory, and being accepted, whatever it is, if it is truth, love rejoices.

And probably, Paul is thinking very especially of the truth of the gospel. If the truth of the gospel is being received, Paul didn't matter, didn't mind whether he was in prison or in the palace. You remember how in one place, he remembered that some of his enemies were preaching the gospel, trying to bring a certain measure of contempt upon himself.

Not of the best of motives, they were preaching the gospel. What's your response to that, fellow? Well, he says, even in that I will rejoice because Christ is preached. He says, whatever happens to me? Jeremiah Burroughs quotes Erasmus.

Erasmus referenced to someone who apparently took great delight in collecting all, I quote, the lame and defective verses in Homer, but was unimpressed by every token of genius that emerged from the same pen. Haven't you met people like that? You imagine a person reading through Homer to find out the faulty, the imperfect verses. What a putrid notion.

But you know, there are folk like that, and sometimes we have folk in churches like that, and they just like to look around and find fault with people, and they never see people's virtues. But they've got a whole list of faults, and you know how they can do that? They can only do that when agate is not thriving in the garden of their hearts. So there are those who strangely ferret out a fault, says Burroughs.

There are those who strangely ferret out a fault in the best of men, and take no little delight in talking or writing about it. Indeed, they may even manufacture it where they're sent, for the sordid is not otherwise satisfied. Haven't we met such people too? May God save us.

And so we close with this. Love bears all things, and believes all things. Since the notion of enduring all things comes later on in the next couplet, probably what we should have here is something slightly different.

We should probably understand the reference here to bearing all things as that amazing capacity to love inwardly, and suffer wrongs and afflictions without complaining. Love does not advertise its crosses, because that means divulging the cause of the pain. So love bears all things.

How many mothers have borne with their children almost to a point of despair, and not said a word. I know of some, you know of others. I am tempted to say more, but I shall not.

And the lover that thus bears all things also believes all things. Not that love is gullible, but love comes to a point. Probably we ought to take the statement in this way.

Perhaps it looks, the statement looks back upon that which spoke of rejoicing in the truth, and stresses again this quality, which far from being blind to the virtue of one's foes, is prepared to believe every true statement about him, and give credit where credit is due. Even if somebody gives credit to my sworn enemy, if I have agape, I will not deny that credit to him. See how practical it is.

It is generous rather than suspicious. Now, I will leave it there. My friends, what have we got here? As we conclude, let's ask ourselves, what does it all mount up to? You may find it a little tedious in just looking into these words, and discovering what they mean, and how they relate, first of all, to the Corinthian situation.

I don't know. But I want to suggest to you that if you and I really want to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, we need to undertake this exercise. Because this is the kind of thing that God is expecting to see in all his people.

God, the God of the Bible, did not simply expect agape in ancient Corinth. He did expect it there. He expected to see the divisions ended.

He expected to see sin expelled and unity coming into the church, and men and women exercising the diversity of their gifts without losing the sense of there being one in Christ, or allowing anything to come between the one member and another. He did expect that. And God expected it because, by the Spirit, he can create in any human heart this fruit.

He can bring it to the bud. He can bring it forth. He can bring it to perfection in due course.

You and I have some response to this, haven't we? And if I do not gravely misunderstand it, you and I want to acknowledge our guilt and our shame at the sheer lack of this. Oh, it may be there in the bud. Thanks be to God for that.

Oh, it may be there in the bud, and we know perhaps a little about it, but, my friends, how little? How little? Yet this, says the Apostle Paul, is what you should seek before everything else. Now, let me remind you as I close. Paul was not meaning to demean and speak disparagingly of the gifts of the Spirit.

You know that. We saw this last time. In chapter 12 and in chapter 14, he does not disparage the gifts, but he tells them to seek earnestly the best gifts.

There are best and there are better, but this is better than the best. May the Lord grant us to see things in perspective, and may he especially grant us to seek, that's the word, earnestly to seek, to become involved in the disciplines of search, for this, and not to be satisfied until we find this blessed fruit of the Spirit of God, filling our lives, mastering our souls, until the beauty of Jesus be seen in us. Let us pray.

Oh God, our Father, we acknowledge again before the startling revelation of your word that we are so far short of what you have summoned us to be. And we pray that you will make us honest with you, with ourselves concerning this matter, and save us from the sin of Judas, who for a long time professed to be what he was not. We too are afflicted with a tendency to do this, certainly the temptation.

It is always there, and especially those of us in leadership. We find it so easily, so easy to pretend that we have arrived at a place when we have not. In your kindness, in your grace, in your goodness, oh Lord, pour of your Spirit afresh upon us, and enable us to grow ourselves in the knowledge of you, and of your enabling, and in the experience of your grace, to produce in and through us what is pleasing to yourself.

Hear us in Jesus' name. Amen.

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