***The Most Excellent Way***

**The Gathering, Pt. 4, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 November 12, 2023**

***And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.  
But the greatest of these is love.*1 Corinthians 13:13**

**Fruit or gifts?**

And now I will show you the most excellent way . . . .

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:1

1. There is a better way . . . than competing over the gifts of the Spirit

2. The gifts of the Spirit require the fruit of the Sprit to accomplish their purpose

3. Paul balances both what love is and what love does not do

4. The gifts are necessary only as long as we live in the “imperfection”

5. Note that the faith and hope (along with protecting and persevering) are, as Spurgeon says, love’s   
 labors (13:7)

The main point: The fruit of the Spirit (singular) empower the gifts of the Spirit (plural), and love leads  
the fruit

**What we learn about love**

Next to this, love has four sweet companions. There are with her tenderness that "beareth all things," faith that "believeth all things," hope that "hopeth all things," and patience which "endureth all things," and he that hath tenderness, and faith, and hope, and patience hath a brave quaternion of graces to guard him, and he need not be afraid. Best of all, love sucks her life from the wounds of Christ. Love can bear, believe, hope, and endure because Christ has borne, believed, and hoped, and endured for her.

Spurgeon, “Love’s Labors”

1. Religion without love is useless -- exercising gifts without the Spirit

*26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

James 1

1. Love allows us to share the life of God

*7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

I John 4

1. Love is always consistent with truth and order

*14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

Ephesians 4

*33 For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.*

1 Corinthians 14

1. Gifts are for the church age and so are necessarily incomplete, but love is forever

*8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

Romans 13

**Putting love in action**

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

1 John 4

1. In showing us the “DNA” of the body, Paul is revealing what God is like

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. 17 In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

1 John 4

2. Love gives us a lens through which we see Jesus’ work

*Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.*

John 13:1

*8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

*9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!*

Romans 5

3. We now have a way of discerning which gift may be the greater (see 12:31a) – that which allows  
 me to most effectively love the other

*But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.*

1 Corinthians 12

4. We now can begin the hard work of deciding what happens when the gifts are in conflict   
 – love wins

*6 The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

Galatians 5:6

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**Resources for further study**

The Bible Project team does a great job of introducing 1 Corinthians at [*https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-1-corinthians/*](https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-1-corinthians/)

Spurgeon, Edwards and Ryle have 1 Corinthians 13 studies at [*https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/1co.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/1co.htm)

Ryle’s study 1 Corinthians 10:14 is a good summary of the book at [*https://www.monergism.com/flee-idolatry*](https://www.monergism.com/flee-idolatry)

John Piper has a very good 1 Corinthians series at [*https://www.desiringgod.org/scripture/1-corinthians/messages*](https://www.desiringgod.org/scripture/1-corinthians/messages)

Keller has a wonderful piece on spiritual gifts at [*www.trinitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/0e1508579\_discerning-and-exercising-spiritual-gifts.pdf*](www.trinitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/0e1508579_discerning-and-exercising-spiritual-gifts.pdf)

Doug has referenced these commentaries:  
Simon Kistemaker’s *New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1993)  
Anthony Thiselton’s *NIGTC* volume (Eerdmans, 2000)  
Harold Mare’s commentary in the *EBC* series (Zondervan, 1976)  
Derek Prime has a shorter study “Opening Up 1 Corinthians” (Day One, 2005)

Alexander Maclaren’s commentary on this text is at [*https://www.preceptaustin.org/1\_corinthians\_maclaren\_3#wl73*](https://www.preceptaustin.org/1_corinthians_maclaren_3%23wl73)

Doug likes the ESV Study Bible’s introduction to 1 Corinthians and included it in these notes.

**1 Corinthians  
Introduction from the ESV**

*Author and Title*

The first word of 1 Corinthians states that Paul is its author. There is no good reason to doubt this. The theological concerns of the letter, the energy of its style, its vocabulary, and its historical connections with the other Pauline letters and Acts mark it as Pauline. The traditional title of the letter means that it is the first of two *canonical* letters by Paul to the Corinthians, not that it was Paul’s first letter to them (see 5:9).

*Date*

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from the city of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia (16:8, 19) sometime before the final day of Pentecost (16:8; cf. Lev. 23:11, 15), and therefore in the spring. It is unclear whether this was the spring of a.d. 53, 54, or 55. He wrote, in any case, near the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:5–9; cf. Acts 19:21–22).

*Theme*

First Corinthians covers a number of topics (see “Key Themes”). One theme emerges from these discussions, however, as Paul’s dominant concern. Paul wants this church, divided because of the arrogance of its more powerful members, to work together for the advancement of the gospel. He wants them to drop their divisive one-upmanship, build up the faith of those who are weak, and witness effectively to unbelievers.

*Purpose, Occasion, and Background*

Corinth sat on the isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnesian peninsula. This location made it a flourishing crossroads for sea traffic between the Aegean region and the western Mediterranean. It was a place where many cultures and religions mingled. Since it was a Roman colony, Roman law and customs were important, particularly among the upper classes, but “many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’ ” found a home in Corinth (8:5). The worship of these gods was fully integrated into governmental affairs, civic festivals, trade guilds, and social clubs, and everyday life in general. Corinth was also a destination for traveling professional orators who charged a fee for attendance at their entertaining rhetorical displays and advised people on how to advance socially.

Into this milieu Paul brought the gospel of Jesus Christ, and soon a church was established. He was aided in his work by two new-found friends from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila, who, like Paul, were displaced Jews and tentmakers by trade (Acts 18:1–4, 18–19, 24–28; Rom. 16:3; 2 Tim. 4:19). Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila spent 18 months in Corinth in the early 50s and then, after a brief trip to Judea and Syria, Paul traveled to Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila were already there (Acts 18:19; 1 Cor. 16:19) and, by the time Paul arrived, they had already met the skillful Christian apologist Apollos, who had also been in Corinth (Acts 18:24–19:1; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–6, 22; 4:6; 16:12).

Paul settled in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31) and at some point wrote to the Corinthians the otherwise unknown letter that he mentions in 1 Corinthians 5:9. It is not known what prompted the letter but it dealt with sexual immorality, a persistent problem for the Corinthian church (5:1–13; 6:12–20). Sometime later, Paul received an oral report indicating that the Corinthians had not only misunderstood his first letter (5:10) but were plagued with serious problems of division, sexual immorality, and social snobbery (1:10; 5:1; 11:18). Around the same time, a letter arrived from the Corinthians that displayed considerable theological confusion about marriage, divorce, participation in pagan religions, order within corporate worship, and the bodily resurrection of Christians (7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 15:12, 35).

In response to these troubling developments, Paul felt compelled to write a substantial letter to Corinth, making the case that much of their conduct was out of step with the gospel. At the root of their disunity lay an arrogance (3:21; 4:6, 8, 18–19; 5:2, 6) that was incompatible with God’s free gifts to them in Christ: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1:30; 4:7). In addition, a self-centered insistence on their own rights (6:12; 8:9; 9:12; 10:23) at the expense of the weak (8:10; 11:22) and marginalized (14:16, 23) revealed that their own social advancement rather than the gospel’s advancement was their top priority.

At the root of much of the immorality and idolatry in Corinth, moreover, lay a lack of appreciation for the holiness that God requires of his people. Though the particulars of the Mosaic law were no longer to define the boundaries for God’s people (7:19), the law’s underlying theme that God’s people were to be “set apart”—a people marked off from their culture—remained in place (5:1–2, 13; 7:19; 10:1–5). In addition, the dwelling of God’s Spirit within each believer (6:19) and the new unity that believers have with the resurrected, living Christ (6:14–17; 15:30–34) implied that the Corinthians needed to make a clean break from the moral impurity of their culture.

Despite the often stern tone of the letter (4:18–21; 5:2; 11:17, 22; 15:36), Paul was thankful to God for the Corinthians (1:8) and felt a deep personal affection for them (16:24). Because of this love, and for the purpose of God’s glory (10:31), Paul wanted the Corinthians to become a well-constructed dwelling place for God’s Spirit (3:12, 16) and to be “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8).

*Timeline*

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*The Ancient City of Corinth*

The Acrocorinth is a small but steep mountain 1,886 feet (575 m) high on the Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece. Ancient Corinth was built at the mountain’s foot, benefiting also from the natural spring that provided water for the town. In Paul’s day Corinth, though a couple of miles inland, oversaw the territory connecting the Adriatic port of Lechaion on the west with the Aegean port of Cenchreae to the east (see Acts 18:18). Ships were often portaged between these seaports across this narrow stretch of the Peloponnesian isthmus, approximately 3.7 miles (6 km) wide at its narrowest. Several rulers in the first century a.d. foolishly attempted to construct a canal across the isthmus, but this was not successfully accomplished until the nineteenth century.

The famed Greek city of Corinth, renowned for its artistry in bronze, its wealth, and its wanton sexuality, was destroyed in 146 b.c. during a war with Rome. The city was re-founded as a Roman colony in 44 b.c. by Roman freedmen, and the distinct archaeological strata in the city center testify to this gap in its history. Inscriptions from the first hundred years of the new colony were mostly in Latin, although strong marks of Greek culture were also evident in the art and life of the city.

First-century Corinth followed a Roman city plan based on a rectangular grid. Typical urban structures were built (or reconstructed), such as shops, stoas, basilicas, a bouleuterion (for the city council meetings), a gymnasium, baths, latrines, and a theater. A few large houses from this period have also been excavated. The center of town boasted the refashioned Peirene Fountain as a pleasant place from which to draw spring water. To this day a raised speaker’s platform stands in the main forum, and a nearby inscription refers to this platform as the *rostra* (equivalent to a *bēma* or tribunal); this is probably the very location where Gallio judged Paul to be innocent (Acts 18:12–17). Some other significant archaeological remains date from post-NT times, such as the odeion (a small covered theater).

In Paul’s day the great Doric-style temple (to Athena or Apollo) from the sixth century b.c. remained a central feature in Corinth, and multiple temples to other deities dotted the city. Indeed, when the author Pausanias wrote about Corinth in the mid-second century a.d., his description of the city read like a tour guide of pagan monumental sacred sites. Corinth boasted an important sanctuary of Asklepios (the god of healing), where people would come to offer sacrifices to the god and to seek medical care. Marks of the imperial cult were evident, especially if some are correct in identifying the substantial Temple E as being dedicated to Augustus’s sister Octavia (though it may have been for Jupiter). The famous Hellenistic-era temple of Aphrodite atop the Acrocorinth had been rebuilt as a rather small structure during the first-century a.d. Scholars debate whether Strabo’s first-century a.d. account of 1,000 temple prostitutes refers to the earlier Hellenistic temple of Aphrodite or to the Roman one of Paul’s day; the former seems more probable (Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20c; see also Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 13.573c–574c). In any case, in Roman times wanton sexuality would have been common at such a port city.

*Key Themes*

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| --- | --- |
| 1. Since the church is the dwelling place of God’s Spirit, the people who make up the church should work for unity by building each other up. | 1:10–4:21 (esp. 3:10–16; 14:12) |
| 2. Christians should build up the church in four practical ways: |  |
| a. they should be sensitive to those of fragile faith. | 8:1–9:18; 10:28, 33 |
| b. they should win unbelievers through culturally sensitive evangelism. | 9:19–23; 10:27, 32–33 |
| c. they should conduct worship services in such a way that unbelievers present might come to faith. | 14:16, 23–25 |
| d. their corporate worship should use spiritual gifts not for personal display, or evaluating who has a better gift, but to build up the church. | 11:2–16; 12:12–30; 14:1–35 |
| 3. Sexual relations form a union between man and woman as profound as the union of the believer with Christ, and so sexual activity should be confined to marriage. | 5:1–13; 6:12–20; 7:5, 9, 36 |
| 4. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are important, but both are subordinate to personal trust in the gospel and to living in the way that God commands. | 1:14–17; 10:1–5; 11:17–34; 15:29–34 |
| 5. The bodily resurrection of Jesus (and of his followers) from the dead is a critical component of Christian faith and practice. | 6:14; 15:1–58 |

*History of Salvation Summary*

Christians are God’s own people, the family of God, the body of Christ (12:12–31), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (3:16). As those who fulfill the OT pattern for the people of God, they are to be a holy community (1:2), reflecting God’s character (1 Pet. 1:15–16). (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the Overview of the Bible.)

*Literary Features*

First Corinthians is a pastoral letter to a spiritually troubled church. Like other NT Epistles, it is an “occasional” letter, and one can quite readily piece together the things that occasioned 1 Corinthians by noting signals in the text. The letter is highly relevant today, as it deals with such issues as the relationship between Christians and their surrounding pagan culture, divisions within the church, the ordering of church practices such as the Lord’s Supper, and the use of spiritual gifts. The letter also deals with matters of personal morality, such as sex, marriage, celibacy, and the virtues (esp. love).

First Corinthians follows the form of a typical first-century epistle, though its content is governed by the specific situation in the Corinthian church. For example, the usual epistolary elements of salutation, thanksgiving, and *paraenesis* (set of moral exhortations) receive scant treatment. The body of the letter is taken up with situations and questions from the Corinthian church that Paul addresses, and the epistolary close (ch. 16) is extensive because of business Paul has with the church. The rhetorical modes of exhortation and instruction dominate the letter. Chapter 13 is an encomium (a written tribute) in praise of love.

The book makes extensive use of rhetorical techniques such as contrast, repetition, and analogy. It draws sharp contrasts between truth and error, and between moral good and evil. Because Paul regards the Corinthian Christians as being out of line in a number of areas, the letter exhibits a strong corrective tone.

**The Setting of 1 Corinthians**

*c. a.d. 53–55*

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians during his third missionary journey, near the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:21–22). Both Corinth and Ephesus were wealthy port cities steeped in pagan idolatry and philosophy. Corinth benefited both militarily and economically from its strategic location at one end of the isthmus that connected the southern Greek peninsula to the mainland.

*Outline*

I. Epistolary Introduction to the Letter’s Main Themes (1:1–9)

A. Greeting: apostleship, sanctity, and unity (1:1–3)

B. Thanksgiving: speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts (1:4–9)

II. Divisions over Christian Preachers (1:10–4:21)

A. The problem reported (1:10–17a)

B. God’s wisdom answers the problem (1:17b–4:21)

1. The nature of God’s wisdom (1:17b–2:16)

2. God’s wisdom applied to Apollos, Paul, and the Corinthians (3:1–4:21)

III. A Report of Sexual Immorality and Legal Wrangling (5:1–6:20)

A. Incest, arrogance, and the need for discipline (5:1–13)

B. Trivial cases before unrighteous judges (6:1–11)

C. Sexual immorality and the body’s resurrection (6:12–20)

IV. Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (7:1–11:1)

A. Marriage, divorce, and unchangeable circumstances (7:1–24)

B. The betrothed and widows (7:25–40)

C. Food offered to idols (8:1–11:1)

V. Divisions over Corporate Worship (11:2–14:40)

A. Head coverings and worship (11:2–16)

B. Social snobbery at the Lord’s Table (11:17–34)

C. Elevating one spiritual gift above others (12:1–14:40)

VI. The Futility of Faith If the Dead Are Not Raised (15:1–58)

A. The truthfulness of the traditions about Christ’s resurrection (15:1–11)

B. Christ’s resurrection and the resurrection of believers (15:12–34)

C. The nature of the resurrection body (15:35–58)

VII. The Collection for the Saints and Travel Plans (16:1–12)

VIII. Closing Admonitions and Greetings (16:13–24)[[1]](#footnote-1)

## WHAT LASTS

Alexander Maclaren at [*https://www.preceptaustin.org/1\_corinthians\_maclaren\_3#wl73*](https://www.preceptaustin.org/1_corinthians_maclaren_3%23wl73)

‘Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. 13. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three… ’—1 COR. xiii. 8, 13.

We discern the run of the Apostle's thought best by thus omitting the intervening verses and connecting these two. The part omitted is but a buttress of what has been stated in the former of our two verses; and when we thus unite them there is disclosed plainly the Apostle's intention of contrasting two sets of things, three in each set. The one set is ‘prophecies, tongues, knowledge’; the other, ‘faith, hope, charity.’ There also comes out distinctly that the point mainly intended by the contrast is the transiency of the one and the permanence of the other. Now, that contrast has been obscured and weakened by two mistakes, about which I must say a word.

With regard to the former statement, ‘Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease,’ that has been misunderstood as if it amounted to a declaration that the miraculous gifts in the early Church were intended to be of brief duration. However true that may be, it is not what Paul means here. The cessation to which he refers is their cessation in the light of the perfect Future. With regard to the other statement, the abiding of faith, hope, charity, that, too, has been misapprehended as if it indicated that faith and hope belonged to this state of things only, and that love was the greatest of the three, because it was permanent. The reason for that misconception has mainly lain in the misunderstanding of the force of ‘*Now*,’ which has been taken to mean ‘for the present,’ as an implied contrast to an unspoken ‘then’; just as in the previous verse we have, ‘*Now* we see through a glass, *then* face to face.’ But the ‘now’ in this text is not, as the grammarians say, temporal, but logical. That is, it does not refer to time, but to the sequence of the Apostle's thought, and is equivalent to ‘so then.’ ‘So then abideth faith, hope, charity.’

The scope of the whole, then, is to contrast the transient with the permanent, in Christian experience. If we firmly grasped the truth involved, our estimates would be rectified and our practice revolutionised.

I. I ask this question—What will drop away?

Paul answers, ‘prophecies, tongues, knowledge.’ Now these three were all extraordinary gifts belonging to the present phase of the Christian life. But inasmuch as these gifts were the heightening of natural capacities and faculties, it is perfectly legitimate to enlarge the declaration and to use these three words in their widest signification. So understood, they come to this, that all our present modes of apprehension and of utterance are transient, and will be left behind.

‘Knowledge, it shall cease,’ and as the Apostle goes on to explain, in the verses which I have passed over for my present purpose, it shall cease because the perfect will absorb into itself the imperfect, as the inrushing tide will obliterate the little pools in the rocks on the seashore. For another reason, the knowledge, the mode of apprehension belonging to the present, will pass—because here it is indirect, and there it will be immediate. ‘We shall know face to face,’ which is what philosophers mean by intuition. Here our knowledge ‘creeps from point to point,’ painfully amassing facts, and thence, with many hesitations and errors, groping its way towards principles and laws. Here it is imperfect, with many a gap in the circumference; or like the thin red line on a map which shows the traveller's route across a prairie, or like the spider's thread in the telescope, stretched athwart the blazing disc of the sun—‘but then face to face.’ Incomplete knowledge shall be done away; and many of its objects will drop, and much of what makes the science of earth will be antiquated and effete. What would the hand-loom weaver's knowledge of how to throw his shuttle be worth in a weaving-shed with a thousand looms? Just so much will the knowledges of earth be when we get yonder.

Modes of utterance will cease. With new experiences will come new methods of communication. As a man can speak, and a beast can only growl or bark, so a man in heaven, with new experiences, will have new methods of communication. The comparison between that mode of utterance which we now have, and that which we shall then possess, will be like the difference between the old-fashioned semaphore, that used to wave about clumsy wooden arms in order to convey intelligence, and the telegraph.

Think, then, of a man going into that future life, and saying ‘I knew more about Sanscrit than anybody that ever lived in Europe’; ‘I sang sweet songs’; ‘I was a past master in philology, grammars, and lexicons’; ‘I was a great orator.’ ‘Tongues shall cease’; and the modes of utterance that belonged to earth, and all that holds of them, will drop away, and be of no more use.

If these things are true, brethren, with regard even to the highest form of these high and noble things, how much more and more solemnly true are they with regard to the aims and objects which most of us have in view? They will all drop away, and we shall be left, stripped of what, for most of us, has made the whole interest and activity of our lives.

II. What will last?

‘So then, abideth these three, faith, hope, love.’ When Paul takes three nouns and couples them with a verb in the singular, he is not making a slip of the pen, or committing a grammatical blunder which a child could correct. But there is a great truth in that piece of apparent grammatical irregularity; for the faith, the hope, and the love, for which he can only afford a singular verb, are thereby declared to be in their depth and essence one thing, and it, the triple star, abides, and continues to shine. The three primitive colours are unified in the white beam of light. Do not correct the grammar, and spoil the sense, but discern what he means when he says, ‘Now, abid*eth* faith, hope, love.’ For this is what he means, that the two latter come out of the former, and that without it they are nought, and that it without them is dead.

Faith breeds Hope. *There* is the difference between earthly hopes and Christian people's hopes. Our hopes, apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, are but the balancing of probabilities, and the scale is often dragged down by the clutch of eager desires. But all is baseless and uncertain, unless our hopes are the outcome of our faith. Which, being translated into other words, is just this, that the one basis on which men can rest—ay! even for the immediate future, and the contingencies of life, as well as for the solemnities and certainties of heaven—any legitimate and substantial hope is trust in Jesus Christ, His word, His love, His power, and for the heavenly future, in His Resurrection and present glory. A man who believes these things, and only that man, has a rock foundation on which he can build his hope.

Faith, in like manner, is the parent of Love. Paul and John, diverse as they are in the whole cast of their minds, the one being speculative and the other mystical, the one argumentative and the other simply gazing and telling what he sees, are precisely agreed in regard to this matter. For, to the Apostle of Love, the foundation of all human love towards God is, ‘We have known and believed the love that God hath to us,’ and ‘We love Him because He first loved us,’ and to Paul the first step is the trusting reception of the love of God, ‘commended to us’ by the fact that ‘whilst we were yet sinners Christ died for us,’ and from that necessarily flows, if the faith be genuine, the love that answers the sacrifice and obeys the Beloved. So faith, hope, love, these three are a trinity in unity, and it abideth. That is the main point of our last text. Let me say a word or two about it.

I have said that the words have often been misunderstood as if the ‘now’ referred only to the present order of things, in which faith and hope are supposed to find their only appropriate sphere. But that is clearly not the Apostle's meaning here, for many reasons with which I need not trouble you. The abiding of all three is eternal abiding, and there is a heavenly as well as an earthly form of faith and hope as well as of love. Just look at these points for a moment.

‘Faith abides,’ says Paul, yonder, as here. Now, there is a common saying, which I suppose ninety out of a hundred people think comes out of the Bible, about faith being lost in sight. There is no such teaching in Scripture. True, in one aspect, faith is the antithesis of sight. True, Paul does say ‘We walk by faith, not by sight.’ But that antithesis refers only to part of faith's significance. In so far as it is the opposite of sight, of course it will cease to be in operation when ‘we shall know even as we are known’ and ‘see Him as He is.’ But the essence of faith is not in the absence of the person trusted, but the emotion of trust which goes out to the person, present or absent. And in its deepest meaning of absolute dependence and happy confidence, faith abides through all the glories and the lustres of the heavens, as it burns amidst the dimnesses and the darknesses of earth. For ever and ever, on through the irrevoluble ages of eternity, dependence on God in Christ will be the life of the glorified, as it was the life of the militant, Church. No millenniums of possession, and no imaginable increases in beauty and perfectness and enrichment with the wealth of God, will bring us one inch nearer to casting off the state of filial dependence which is, and ever will be, the condition of our receiving them all. Faith ‘abides.’

Hope ‘abides.’ For it is no more a Scriptural idea that hope is lost in fruition, than it is that faith is lost in sight. Rather that Future presents itself to us as the continual communication of an inexhaustible God to our progressively capacious and capable spirits. In that continual communication there is continual progress. Wherever there is progress there must be hope. And thus the fair form, which has so often danced before us elusive, and has led us into bogs and miry places and then faded away, will move before us through all the long avenues of an endless progress, and will ever and anon come back to tell us of the unseen glories that lie beyond the next turn, and to woo us further into the depths of heaven and the fulness of God. Hope ‘abides.’

Love ‘abides.’ I need not, I suppose, enlarge upon that thought which nobody denies, that love is the eternal form of the human relation to God. It, too, like the mercy which it clasps, ‘endureth for ever.’

But I may remind you of what the Apostle does not explain in our text, that it is greater than its linked sisters, because whilst faith and hope belong only to a creature, and are dependent and expectant of some good to come to themselves, and correspond to something which is in God in Christ, the love which springs from faith and hope not only corresponds to, but resembles, that from which it comes and by which it lives. The fire kindled is cognate with the fire that kindles; and the love that is in man is like the love that is in God. It is the climax of his nature; it is the fulfilling of all duty; it is the crown and jewelled clasp of all perfection. And so ‘abideth faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love.’

III. Lastly, what follows from all this?

First, let us be quite sure that we understand what this abiding love is. I dare say you have heard people say ‘Ah! I do not care much about Paul's theology. Give me the thirteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians. That is beautiful; that praise of Love; *that* comes home to men.’ Yes, very beautiful. Are you quite sure that you know what Paul means by ‘love’? I do not use the word charity, because that lovely word, like a glistening meteor that falls upon the earth, has a rust, as it were, upon its surface that dims its brightness very quickly. Charity has come to mean an indulgent estimate of other people's faults; or, still more degradingly, the giving of money out of your pockets to other people's necessities. These are what the people who do not care much about Paul's theology generally suppose that he means here. But these do not exhaust his meaning. Paul's notion of love is the response of the human love to the divine, which divine is received into the heart by simple faith in Jesus Christ. And his notion of love which never faileth, and endureth all things, and hopeth all things, is love to men, which is but one stream of the great river of love to God. If we rightly understand what he means by love, we shall find that his praise of love is as theological as anything that he ever wrote. We shall never get further than barren admiration of a beautiful piece of writing, unless our love to men has the source and root to which Paul points us.

Again, let us take this great thought of the permanence of faith, hope, and love as being the highest conception that we can form of our future condition. It is very easy to bewilder ourselves with speculations and theories of another life. I do not care much about them. The great gates keep their secret well. Few stray beams of light find their way through their crevices. The less we say the less likely we are to err. It is easy to let ourselves be led away, by turning rhetoric into revelation, and accepting the symbols of the New Testament as if they carried anything more than images of the realities. But far beyond golden pavements, and harps, and crowns, and white robes, lies this one great thought that the elements of the imperfect, Christlike life of earth are the essence of the perfect, Godlike life in heaven. ‘Now abide these three, faith, hope, love.’

Last of all, let us shape our lives in accordance with these certainties. The dropping away of the transient things is no argument for neglecting or despising them; for our handling of them makes our characters, and our characters abide. But it is a very excellent argument for shaping our lives so as to seek first the first things, and to secure the permanent qualities, and so to use the transient as that it shall all help us towards that which does not pass.

What will a Manchester man that knows nothing except goods and office work, and knows these only in their superficial aspect, and not as related to God, what, in the name of common-sense, will he do with himself when he gets into a world where there is not a single ledger, nor a desk, nor a yard of cloth of any sort? What will some of us do when, in like manner, we are stripped of all the things that we have cared about, and worked for, and have made our aims down here? Suppose that you knew that you were under sailing orders to go somewhere or other, and that at any moment a breathless messenger might appear and say, ‘Come along! we are all waiting for you’; and suppose that you never did a single thing towards getting your outfit ready, or preparing yourself in any way for that which might come at any moment, and could not but come before very long. Would you be a wise man? But that is what a great many of us are doing; doing every day, and all day long, and doing that only. ‘He shall leave them in the midst of his days,’ says a grim text, ‘and at his latter end shall be a fool.’

What will drop? Modes of apprehension, modes of utterance, occupations, duties, relationships, loves; and we shall be left standing naked, stripped, as it were, to the very quick, and only as much left as will keep our souls alive. But if we are clothed with faith, hope, love, we shall not be found naked. Cultivate the high things, the permanent things; then death will not wrench you violently from all that you have been and cared for; but it will usher you into the perfect form of all that you have been and done upon earth. All these things will pass, but faith, hope, love, ‘stay not behind nor in the grave are trod,’ but will last as long as Christ, their Object, lives, and as long as we in Him live also.

**LOVE**

By J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)

"Now these three remain: faith, hope and love.

But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

LOVE is rightly called "the Queen of Christian graces." "The goal of this

command," says Paul, "is love" (1 Timothy 1:5). It is a grace which all

people profess to admire. It seems a plain practical thing which everybody

can understand. It is none of "those troublesome doctrinal points" about

which Christians disagree. Thousands, I suspect, would not be ashamed to

tell you that they know nothing about justification, or regeneration, or

about the work of Christ, or of the Holy Spirit. But nobody, I believe,

would like to say that he knows nothing about love! If men possess nothing

else in religion, they always flatter themselves that they possess "love."

A few plain thoughts about love will be very useful. There are false notions

about love which need to be dispelled. There are mistakes about it which

require to be rectified. In my admiration of love I yield to none. But I am

bold to say that in many minds the whole subject seems completely

misunderstood.

I. First, Let me show, "the place the Bible gives to love."

II. Secondly, let me show, "what the love of the Bible really is."

III. Thirdly, let me show, "where true love comes from."

IV. Lastly, let me show, "why love is `the greatest' of the graces."

I ask for the sincere attention of my readers to the subject. My heart's

desire and prayer to God is that the growth of love may be promoted in this

sin-burdened world. In nothing does the fallen condition of man show itself

so strongly as in the scarcity of Christian love. There is little faith on

earth, little hope, little knowledge of Divine things. But nothing,

after all, is as scarce as real love.

I. Let me show "the place which the Bible gives to love."

I begin with this point in order to establish the immense practical

importance of my subject. I do not forget that there are many Christians in

this present day who almost refuse to look at anything practical in

Christianity. They can talk of nothing but two or three favorite doctrines.

Now I want to remind my readers that the Bible contains much about practice

as well as about doctrine, and that one thing to which it attaches great

weight is "love."

I turn to the New Testament, and ask men to observe what it says about love.

In all religious inquiries there is nothing like letting the Scripture speak

for itself. There is no surer way of finding out truth than the old way of

turning to simple Bible texts. Texts were our Lord's weapons, both in

answering Satan, and in arguing with the Jews. Texts are the guides we must

never be ashamed to refer to in the present day--What does the Scripture

say? What is written? How do you read it?

Let us hear what Paul says to the Corinthians: "If I speak in the tongues of

men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a

clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries

and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have

not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my

body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-

3).

Let us hear what Paul says to the Colossians: "And over all these virtues put

on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:14).

Let us hear what Paul says to Timothy: "The goal of this command is love,

which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1

Timothy 1:5).

Let us hear what Peter says: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love

covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

Let us hear what our Lord Jesus Christ Himself says about that love, "A new

command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love

one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you

love one another" (John 13:34-35). Above all, let us read our Lord's account

of the last judgment, and mark that the lack of love will condemn millions,

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed,

into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was

hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing

to drink" (Matthew 25:41-42).

Let us hear what Paul says to the Romans: "Let no debt remain outstanding,

except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow

man has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8).

Let us hear what Paul says to the Ephesians: "Live a life of love, just as

Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and

sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2).

Let us hear what John says: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love

comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 5:7-8).

I shall make no comment upon these texts. I think it better to place them

before my readers in their naked simplicity, and to let them speak for

themselves. If any one is disposed to think the subject of this paper a

matter of insignificance, I will only ask him to look at these texts, and to

think again. He that would take down "love" from the high and holy place it

occupies in the Bible, and treat it as a matter of secondary importance,

must settle his account with God's Word. I certainly shall not waste time in

arguing with him.

To my own mind the evidence of these texts appears clear, plain, and

incontrovertible. They show the immense importance of love as one of the

"things that accompany salvation." They prove that it has a right to demand

the serious attention of all who call themselves Christians, and that those

who despise the subject are only exposing their own ignorance of Scripture.

II. Let me show secondly, "what the love of the Bible really is."

I think it of great importance to have clear views on this point. It is

precisely here that mistakes about love begin. Thousands delude themselves

with the idea that they have "love," when they don't due from a downright

ignorance of Scripture. Their love is not the love described in the Bible.

(a) The love of the Bible does not consist in giving to the poor. It is a

common delusion to suppose that it does. Yet Paul tells us plainly that a

man may "give all he possesses to the poor" (1 Corinthians 13:3), and not

have love. That a loving man will "remember the poor," there can be no

question. (Galatians 6:10) That he will do all he can to assist them,

relieve them, and lighten their burdens, I don't for a moment deny. All I

say is that this does not make up "love." It is easy to spend a fortune

in giving away money, and soup, and bread, and blankets, and clothing, and

yet to be utterly destitute of Bible love.

(b) The love of the Bible does not consist in never disapproving anybody's

conduct. Here is another very common delusion! Thousands pride themselves

on never condemning others, or saying they are wrong, whatever they may do.

They convert the precept of our Lord, "Do not judge," into an excuse for

having no unfavorable opinion at all of anybody. They pervert His

prohibition of rash and censorious judgments into a prohibition of all

judgment whatsoever. Your neighbor may be a drunkard, a liar, a violent man.

Never mind! "It is not love," they tell you, "to pronounce him, wrong." You

are to believe that he has a good heart at the bottom! This idea of love is,

unhappily, a very common one. It is full of mischief. To throw a veil over

sin, and to refuse to call things by their right names--to talk of "hearts"

being good, when "lives" are flatly wrong--to shut our eyes against

wickedness, and excuse their immorality--this is not Scriptural love.

(c) The love of the Bible does not consist in never disapproving anybody's

religious opinions. Here is another most serious and growing delusion.

There are many who pride themselves on never pronouncing others mistaken,

whatever views they may hold. Your neighbor, for example, may be a Roman

Catholic, or a Mormon. But the "love" of many says that you have no right to

think him wrong! If he is sincere, it is "unloving" to think unfavorably

of his spiritual condition! From such love may I ever be delivered! At this

rate the Apostles were wrong in going out to preach to the Gentiles! At this

rate there is no use in missions! At this rate we had better close our

Bibles, and shut up our churches! Everybody is right, and nobody is wrong!

Everybody is going to heaven, and nobody is going to hell!

Such love is a monstrous caricature. To say that all are equally right in

their opinions, though their opinions flatly contradict one another--to say

that all are equally on their way to heaven, though their doctrinal

sentiments are as opposite as black and right--this is not Scriptural love.

Love like this pours contempt on the Bible, and talks as if God had not given

it as a written test of truth. Love like this confuses all our notions

of heaven and would fill it with a discordant inharmonious rabble. True love

does not think everybody is right in their doctrines. True love cries--"Do

not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from

God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."--"If anyone

comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into

your house or welcome him" (2 John 1:10).

I leave the negative side of the question here. I have dwelt upon it at some

length because of the days in which we live and the strange notions which

abound. Let me now turn to the positive side. Having shown what love is

not, let me now show what it is.

Love is that "love," which Paul places first among those fruits brought forth

in the heart of a believer. "The fruit of the Spirit is love" (Galatians

5:22). Love to God, such as Adam had before the fall, is its first feature.

He that has love, desires to love God with heart, and soul and mind, and

strength. Love to man is its second feature. He that has love, desires to

love his neighbor as himself. This is indeed that view in which the word

"love" in Scripture is more especially regarded. When I speak of a believer

having "love" in his heart, I mean that he has love to both God and man.

When I speak of a believer having "love" I mean more particularly that be has

love to man.

The love of the Bible will show itself in a believer's actions. It will make

him ready to do kind acts to everyone within his reach--both to their bodies

and souls. It will not let him be content with soft words and kind wishes.

It will make him diligent in doing all that lies in his power to lessen the

sorrow and increase the happiness of others. Like his Master, he will

care more for ministering than for being ministered to, and will look for

nothing in return. Like his Master's great apostle he will very willingly

"spend and be spent" for others, even though they repay him with hatred, and

not with love. True love does not want rewards. Its work is its reward.

The love of the Bible will show itself in a believer's "readiness to bear"

evil as well as to do good. It will make him patient under provocation,

forgiving when injured, meek when unjustly attacked, quiet when slandered.

It will make him bear much, put up with much and look over much, submit often

and deny himself often, all for the sake of peace. It will make him control

his temper, and check his tongue. True love is not always asking,

"What are my rights? Am I treated as I deserve?" but, "How can I best

promote peace? How can I do that which is most edifying to others?"

The love of the Bible will show itself in the "general spirit and demeanor"

of a believer. It will make him kind, unselfish, good-natured, good-

tempered, and considerate of others. It make him gentle, friendly, and

courteous, in all the daily relations of private life, thoughtful for others'

comfort, tender for others' feelings, and more anxious to give pleasure than

to receive. True love never envies others when they prosper, nor rejoices in

the calamities of others when they are in trouble. At all times it will

believe, and hope, and try to put to good use the actions of others. And

even at the worst, it will be full of pity, mercy, and compassion.

Would we like to know where the true Pattern of love like this can be found?

We have only to look at the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, as described in

the Gospels, and we will see it perfectly exemplified. Love radiated forth

in everything He did. His daily life was an incessant "going about" doing

good.--Love radiated forth in all His manner. He was continually hated,

persecuted, slandered, misrepresented. But He patiently endured it all. No

angry word ever fell from His lips. No ill-temper ever appeared in His

demeanor. "When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when

He suffered, He made no threats" (1 Peter 2:23). Love radiated forth in all

His spirit and deportment. The law of kindness was ever on His lips. Among

weak and ignorant disciples, among sick and sorrowful petitioners for help

and relief, among tax-gathers and sinners, among Pharisees and Sadducees, He

was always one and the same--kind and patient to all.

And yet, let it be remembered, our blessed Master never flattered sinners, or

connived at sin. He never shrunk from exposing wickedness in its true

colors, or from rebuking those who would cleave to it. He never hesitated to

denounce false doctrine by whomsoever it might be held, or to exhibit false

practice in its true colors and the certain end to which it tends. He called

things by their right names. He spoke as freely of hell and the fire that is

not quenched, as of heaven and the kingdom of glory. He has left on record

an everlasting proof that perfect love does not require us to approve

everybody's life or opinions, and that it is quite possible to condemn false

doctrine and wicked practice, and yet to be full of love at the same time.

I have now set before my readers the true nature of Scriptural love. I have

given a slight and very brief account of what it is not, and what it is. I

cannot pass on without suggesting two practical thoughts, which press home on

my mind with weighty force, and I hope may press home on others.

You have heard of love. Think, for a moment, how deplorably little love

there is upon earth! How conspicuous is the absence of true love among

Christians! I do not speak of the heathen, I now speak of Christians. What

angry tempers, what passions, what selfishness, what bitter tongues, are to

be found in private families! What strifes, what quarrels, what

spitefulness, what malice, what revenge, what envy between neighbors and

fellow Church members! What jealousies and contentions between those of

varying doctrines! "Where is love?" we may well ask,--"Where is love? Where

is the mind of Christ?" when we look at the spirit which reigns in the world.

No wonder that Christ's cause stands still, and sin abounds, when men's

hearts know so little of love! Surely, we can say "When the Son of Man

comes, will he find love on the earth?"

Think, for another thing, what a happy world this would be if there was more

love. It is the lack of love which causes half the misery there is upon

earth. Sickness, and death, and poverty will not account for more than half

the sorrows. The rest come from ill-temper, ill-nature, strifes, quarrels,

lawsuits, malice, envy, revenge, frauds, violence, wars, and the like. It

would be one great step towards doubling the happiness of mankind, and

halving their sorrows, if all men and women were full of Scriptural love.

III. Let me show, thirdly, "where the love of the Bible comes."

Love, such as I have described, is certainly not natural to man. Naturally,

we are all more or less selfish, envious, ill-tempered, spiteful, ill-

natured, and unkind. We have only to observe children, when left to

themselves, to see the proof of this. Let boys and girls grow up without

proper training and education, and you will not see one of them possessing

Christian love. Mark how some of them think first of themselves, and their

own comfort and advantage! Mark how others are full of pride, passion, and

evil tempers! How can we account for it? There is but one reply. The

natural heart knows nothing of true love.

The love of the Bible will never be found except in a heart prepared by the

Holy Spirit. It is a tender plant, and will never grow except in one soil.

You may as well expect grapes on thorns, or figs on thistles, as look for

love when the heart is not right.

The heart in which love grows is a heart changed, renewed, and transformed by

the Holy Spirit. The image and likeness of God, which Adam lost at the fall,

has been restored to it, however feeble and imperfect the restoration may

appear. It is to "participate in the Divine nature" by union with Christ and

Sonship to God; and one of the first features of that nature is love.

(2 Peter 1:4)

Such a heart is deeply convinced of sin, hates it, flees from it, and fights

with it from day to day. And one of the prime elements of sin which it daily

labors to overcome, is selfishness and lack of love.

Such a heart is deeply aware of its mighty debt to our Lord Jesus Christ. It

feels continually that it owes to Him who died for us on the cross, all its

present comfort, hope, and peace. How can it show forth its gratitude? What

can it render to its Redeemer? If it can do nothing else, it strives to be

like Him, to walk in His footsteps, and, like Him, to be full of love. The

fact that, "God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit"

is the surest fountain of Christian love. Love will produce love.

I ask my readers special attention to this point. It is one of great

importance in the present day. There are many who profess to admire love,

while they care nothing about vital Christianity. They like some of the

fruits and results of the Gospel, but not the root from which these fruits

alone can grow, or the doctrines with which they are inseparably connected.

Hundreds will praise love who hate to be told of man's corruption, of the

blood of Christ, and of the inward work of the Holy Spirit. Many a parent

would like his children to grow up unselfish and good tempered, who would not

be very pleased if someone pressed upon their children the need for

conversion, and repentance, and faith.

Now I desire to protest against this notion, that you can have the fruits of

Christianity without the roots--that you can produce Christian dispositions

without teaching Christian doctrines--that you can have love that will wear

and endure without grace in the heart.

I grant, most freely, that every now and then one sees a person who seems

very loving and amiable, without any distinctive doctrinal religion. But

such cases are so rare and remarkable, that, like exceptions, they only prove

the truth of the general rule. And often, too often, it may be feared in

such cases the apparent love is only external, an in private completely

fails. I firmly believe, as a general rule, you will not find such love as

the Bible describes, except in the soil of a heart thoroughly endowed with

Bible religion. Holy practice will not flourish without sound doctrine.

What God has joined together it is useless to expect to have separate and

asunder.

The delusion which I am trying to combat is helped forward to a most

mischievous decree by the vast majority of novels, romances, and tales of

fiction. Who does not know that the heroes and heroines of these works are

constantly described as patterns of perfection? They are always doing the

right thing, saying the right thing, and showing the right disposition! They

are always kind, and amiable, and unselfish, and forgiving! And yet you

never hear a word about their religion! In short, to judge by the generality

of works of fiction, it is possible to have excellent practical religion

without doctrine, the fruits of the Spirit without the grace of the Spirit,

and the mind of Christ without union with Christ!

Here, in short, is the great danger of reading most novels, romances and

works of fiction. The greater of them give a false or incorrect view of

human nature. They paint their model men and women as they ought to be, and

not as they really are. The readers of such writings get their minds filled

with wrong conceptions of what the world is. Their notions of mankind become

visionary and unreal. They are constantly looking for men and women such as

they never meet, and expecting what they never find.

Let me entreat my readers, once for all, to draw their ideas of human nature

from the Bible, and not from novels. Settle it down in your mind, that there

cannot be true love without a heart renewed by grace. A certain degree of

kindness, courtesy, amiability, good nature, may undoubtedly be seen in many

who have no vital religion. But the glorious plant of Bible love, in all

its fullness and perfection, will never be found without union with Christ

and the work of the Holy Spirit. Teach this to your children, if you have

any. Hold it up in schools, if you are connected with any. Lift up love.

Make much of love. Give place to none in exalting the grace of kindness,

love, good nature, unselfishness, good temper. But never, never forget that

there is but one school in which these things can be thoroughly learned, and

that is the school of Christ. Real love comes down from above. True love is

the fruit of the Spirit. He that would have it must sit at Christ's feet and

learn of Him.

IV. Let me show, lastly, "why love is called the `greatest' of the graces."

The words of Paul, on this subject, are distinct and unmistakable. He winds

up his wonderful chapter on love in the following manner: "Now these three

remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1

Corinthians 13:13).

This expression is very remarkable. Of all the writers in the New Testament,

none, certainly, exalts "faith" as highly as Paul. The Epistles to the

Romans and Galatians abound in sentences showing its vast importance. By it

the sinner lays hold of Christ and is saved. Through it we are justified,

and have peace with God. Yet here the same Paul speaks of something which is

even greater than faith. He puts before us the three leading Christian

graces, and pronounces the following judgment on them,--"The greatest is

love." Such a sentence from such a writer demands special attention. What

are we to understand when we hear of love being greater than faith and hope?

We are not to suppose for a moment, that love can atone for our sins, or make

our peace with God. Nothing can do that for us but the blood of Christ, and

nothing can give us an interest in Christ's blood but faith. It is

unscriptural ignorance not to know this. The office of justifying and

joining the soul to Christ belongs to faith alone. Our love, and all our

other graces, are all more or less imperfect, and could not stand the

severity of God's judgment. When we have done all, we are "unworthy

servants" (Luke 17:10).

We are not to suppose that love can exist independently of faith. Paul did

not intend to set up one grace in rivalry to the other. He did not mean that

one man might have faith, another hope, and another love, and that the best

of these was the man who had love. The three graces are inseparably joined

together. Where there is faith, there will always be love; and where there

is love, there will be faith. Sun and light, fire and heat, ice and

cold, are not more intimately united than faith and love.

The reasons why love is called the greatest of the three graces, appear to me

plain and simple. Let me show what they are.

(a) Love is called the greatest of graces because it is the one in which

there is "some likeness between the believer and his God." God has no need

of faith. He is dependent on no one. There is none superior to Him in whom

He must trust.--God has no need of hope. To Him all things are certain,

whether past, present, or to come.--But "God is love:" and the more love His

people have, the more like they are to their Father in heaven.

(b) Love, for another thing, is called the greatest of the graces because

"it is most useful to others." Faith and hope, beyond doubt, however

precious, have special reference to a believer's own private individual

benefit. Faith unites the soul to Christ, brings peace with God, and opens

the way to heaven. Hope fills the soul with cheerful expectation of things

to come, and, amid the many discouragements of things seen, comforts with

visions of the things unseen. But love is preeminently the grace which makes

a man useful. It is the spring of good works and kindnesses. It is the root

of missions, schools, and hospitals. Love made apostles spend and be spent

for souls. Love raises up workers for Christ and keeps them working. Love

smooths quarrels, and stops strife, and in this sense "covers over a

multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Love adorns Christianity and recommends it

to the world. A man may have real faith, and feel it, and yet his faith may

be invisible to others. But a man's love cannot be hidden.

(c) Love, in the last place, is the greatest of the graces because it is the

one which "endures the longest." In fact, it will never die. Faith will one

day be swallowed up in sight, and hope in certainty. Their office will be

useless in the morning of the resurrection, and like old almanacs, they

will be laid aside. But love will live on through the endless ages of

eternity. Heaven will be the home of love. The inhabitants of heaven will

be full of love. One common feeling will be in all their hearts, and that

will be love.

I leave this part of my subject here and pass on to a conclusion. On each of

the three points of comparison I have just named, between love and the other

graces, it would be easy to enlarge. But time and space both forbid me to do

so. If I have said enough to guard men against mistakes about the right

meaning of the "greatness" of love, I am content. Love, be it ever

remembered, cannot justify and put away our sins. It is neither Christ, nor

faith. But love makes us somewhat like God. Love is of mighty use to the

world. Love will live and flourish when faith's work is done. Surely, in

these points of view, love well deserves the crown.

(1) And now let me ask every one into whose hands this paper may come a

simple question. Let me press home on your conscience the whole subject of

this paper. Do you know anything of the grace of which I have been speaking?

Have you love?

The strong language of the Apostle Paul must surely convince you that the

inquiry is not one that ought to be lightly put aside. The grace without

which that holy man could say, "I am nothing," the grace which the Lord Jesus

says expressly is the great mark of being His disciple,--such a grace as this

demands the serious consideration of every one who is in earnest about the

salvation of his soul. It should set him thinking,--"How does this affect

me? Do I have love?"

You have some knowledge, it may be, of religion. You know the difference

between true and false doctrine. You can, perhaps, even quote texts and

defend the opinions you hold. But, remember the knowledge which is barren of

practical results in life and temperament is a useless possession. The words

of the Apostle are very plain "If I fathom all mysteries and all knowledge,

but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3).

You think you have faith, perhaps. You trust you are one of God's elect, and

rest in that. But surely you should remember that there is a faith of

devils, which is utterly unprofitable, and that the faith of God's elect is a

"faith expressing itself through love." It was when Paul remembered the

"love" of the Thessalonians, as well as their faith and hope, that he said

"We know, that He has chosen you" (1 Thessalonians 1:4).

Look at your own daily life, both at home and away, and consider what place

the love of Scripture has in it. What is your temperament? What are your

ways of behaving toward all around you in your own family? What is your

manner of speaking, especially in seasons of irritation and provocation?

Where is your good-nature, your courtesy, your patience, your meekness,

your gentleness, your toleration? Where are your practical actions of love

in your dealing with others? What do you know of the mind of Him who "went

around doing good"--who loved everyone, though especially His disciples,--who

returned good for evil, and kindness for hatred, and had a heart wide enough

to feel for everyone?

What would you do in heaven, I wonder, if you got there without love? What

comfort could you have in a home where love was the law, and selfishness and

ill-nature completely shut out? Yes! I fear that heaven would be no place

for an unloving and ill-tempered man!--Note what a little boy said one day?"

If grandfather goes to heaven, I hope that I and my brother will not go

there." "Why do you say that?" he was asked. He replied, "If he sees us

there, I am sure he will say, as he does now,--"What are these boys doing

here? Let them get out of the way." He does not like to see us on earth,

and I suppose he would not like to see us in heaven."

Give yourself no rest till you know something by experience of real Christian

love. Go and learn of Him who is meek and lowly of heart, and ask Him to

teach you how to love. Ask the Lord Jesus to put His Spirit within you, to

take away the old heart, to give you a new nature, to make you know something

of His mind. Cry to Him night and day for grace, and give Him no rest until

you feel something of what I have been describing in this paper. Happy

indeed will your life be when you really understand "walking in love."

(2) But I do not forget that I am writing to some who are not ignorant of

the love of Scripture, and who long to feel more of it every year. I will

give you two simple words of exhortation. They are these,--"Practice and

teach the grace of love."

Practice love diligently. It is one of those graces, above all, which grow

by constant exercise. Strive more and more to carry it into every little

detail of daily life. Watch over your own tongue and temper throughout every

hour of the day,--and especially in your dealing with children and near

relatives. Remember the character of the excellent woman: "She speaks with

wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue" (Proverbs 31:26).

Remember the words of Paul: "Do everything in love" (1 Corinthians 16:14).

Love should be seen in little things as well as in great ones. Remember, not

least, the words of Peter: "Love each other deeply;" not a love which just

barely is a flame, but a burning, shining fire, which everyone around us can

see. (1 Peter 4:8) It may cost pains and trouble to keep these things in

mind. There may be little encouragement from the example of others. But

persevere. Love like this brings its own reward.

Finally, teach love to others. Press it above all on children, if you have

any. Remind them constantly that kindness, good nature, and good disposition

are among the first evidences which Christ requires in children. If they

cannot know much, or explain doctrines, they can understand love. A child's

religion is worth very little if it only consists in repeating texts and

hymns. Useful as they are, they are often learned without thought,

remembered without feeling, said over without consideration of their meaning,

and forgotten when childhood is gone. By all means let children be taught

texts and hymns; but let not such teaching be made everything in their

religion. Teach them to keep their tempers, to be kind to one another, to be

unselfish, good-natured, obliging, patient, gentle, forgiving. Tell them

never to forget to their dying day, if they live as long as Methuselah, that

without love the Holy Spirit says, "we are nothing." Tell them "over all

virtues to put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity"

1. Crossway Bibles. (2008). [*The ESV Study Bible*](https://ref.ly/logosres/esvsb?ref=BibleESV.1Co&off=13421) (pp. 2187–2191). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)