

LOVE CONTRASTED, DESCRIBED, EXALTED (1 COR. 13)

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OUR subject this morning is Love Contrasted, Love Described, Love Exalted. Our text is the whole of the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. This chapter, which we are to study this morning is not only one of the most familiar, but also one of the most important and remarkable in the whole Bible. If there were no other proof of Paul's inspiration, this chapter would go far toward establishing it. The translation of the chapter found in the Revised Version is far better than that found in the Authorized Version, but by far the best translation of all is the translation into life. Every Christian should read and re-read this chapter until mind and heart and will are saturated with it, until its fragrance distils itself in our every act and word and thought. The chapter naturally divides itself into three parts; the first part, verses 1-3, Love Contrasted, or the Absolute Indispensability of Love; the second part, verses 4-7, Love Described, or the Everyday Manifestations of Love ; the third part, verses 8 - 13, Love Exalted, or the Peerless Pre-eminence of Love.

I. LOVE CONTRASTED OR THE ABSOLUTE INDISPENSABILITY OP LOVE.

Let us first look at Love Contrasted, or the Indispensability of Love. "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing." Here love is contrasted with five things in succession, each of which was held in great esteem in Corinth, and each of which is held in great esteem to-day. But Paul says no one of them, nor all of them together, will supply the lack of love.

1. The first thing that Paul contrasts with love is the gift of tongues, and the gift of tongues in its highest conceivable form: " Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels. How the world would admire and applaud a man who could do that. A man upon whom the Spirit fell in such mighty power that not only the Pentecostal wonder would be repeated and Parthians and Medes and Elamites and Libyans and Romans and Cretes and Arabians hear men talking in their own tongues, but also the man would talk with the tongue of angels as well as the tongues of men. That would be great and marvellous in the eyes of the world, but Paul says that even thought that should happen, if that man had not love he would after all be only sounding brass or a clanging cymbal, just a brazen noise. The world looks at the eloquence on a man's lips. God looks at the love in his heart. The gifts of the Spirit are greatly to be desired; but the graces of the Spirit are far more to be desired, especially the grace of love (1 Cor. 12:31). We look oftentimes in wonder and admiration at the eloquent preacher, but God looks down into his heart and sees no love there, and says, "nothing but noise sounding brass and a clanging cymbal."

2. The second thing Paul contrasts with love is the gift of prophecy. He describes this gift in the very highest form of its manifestation, "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge." Surely this is something to be much coveted and greatly admired. Surely this will win God's applause. The man of great theological learning and perfect spiritual vision must occupy a very high place in God's estimation. Listen to what God says, "even if a man have all this and have not love, he is NOTHING." Think of it, just nothing. How the world applauds the seer irrespective of what he is in heart, but God asks, "Is he also a lover?" If not, he is nothing, absolutely nothing.

3. Now Paul brings forward a third thing and contrasts it with love faith, miracleworking faith: miracle-working faith in the highest conceivable form, faith so as to remove mountains. Surely this will count for something with God. Surely this will give a man eminence in His sight. Even though a man is very faulty in character, if he can do wonders by the power of faith, he must stand high not only in the estimation of man but God. Listen to what God says, "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love I am NOTHING." Think of that nothing! There are those in these days who are counting upon their gifts of healing and their extraordinary manifestations of faith to commend them to God. They would better ask themselves, "Have I love?" Some of them do not seem to have according to the description given in verses 4-7.

4. Paul next brings forward a fourth thing that men count much on as commending them to God magnificent giving, "If I bestow all my goods to feed the poor." Surely a man who does that is a great man in God's sight. Surely he will get rich reward. But the inspired Apostle shakes his head, "not necessarily," he says, "you can give all you have, every dollar, every cent, and that too for the most philanthropic purpose, to feed the poor; but if you have not love, you will gain by it just nothing. How many false hopes that annihilates. Men with hearts full of selfishness are building great hopes for time and eternity upon the fact that they have given so much to the poor and to various charitable enterprises. But God puts the very searching question to you, "Have you love?" If not, your gifts will do you no more good than squandering your goods in riot and folly would. It will all profit you nothing.

5. And now Paul takes up a fifth thing, and that which above all others is supposed to entitle one to a crown martyrdom, "If I give my body to be burned." Surely we have at last found one for whom God will have words of unstinting commendation the brave martyr who marches to the stake for convictions, for truth, for right. For him there must be a sure and great reward, the martyr's crown. Listen, "and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love it profiteth me NOTHING." Oh, you who think so much and talk so much of what you have suffered for Christ, think of that. It all counts for nothing if you have not love. There is nothing then, absolutely nothing, that will take the place of love. Gifts of speech, great knowledge of the deep things of God, miracle working faith, the greatest possible giving, extreme martyrdom, will not take the place of love. Nay, further, they count for nothing if love is lacking. One question then is driven home with tremendous emphasis to each one of our hearts, Have you love? This brings us to the second division of the chapter.

II. LOVE DESCRIBED OR THE EVERYDAY MANIFESTATIONS OF LOVE.

God will not leave us in any self-deception or any doubt as to whether we have love or not. He gives a very plain description by which love can be known, wherever it exists, and by which its absence can be known wherever love is lacking. Love has fifteen marks, not one of which is ever wanting where love exists. We cannot dwell at great length upon each one, nor do we need to.

1. The first mark of love is that it "suffereth long." Love endures injury after injury, insult after insult, wrong after wrong, slander after slander, and still keeps right on loving and forgiving and forgetting. It wastes itself in vainly trying to help the unworthy and ungrateful, and still it loves on. That is the first mark of love. Do you show it?

2. The second mark of love is, it "is kind." It knows no harshness. It may be severe even as Jesus Himself was on occasion, but its necessary severity is shot through with gentleness and tenderness and pity. That is love.

3. The third mark of love is, "love envieth not." Love knows no envy. How could it? He that really loves is as much interested in the welfare of others as in his own. How then can he envy? Does a mother ever envy the prosperity of her child? Is it not her chief delight? Love never envies, never. Do you love? Do you ever secretly grieve over and try to discount another's progress, temporal or spiritual? Then you have not love. You may speak with the tongues of men and of angels, you may have the gift of prophecy, know all knowledge, you may have all faith so that mountains are disappearing before your onward march, you may be giving all your goods to feed the poor, you may be ready to die at the stake for your convictions, but you have not love, and you are nothing. Oh, friends, how often when we hear of another's prosperity or the great work of another Christian or Church, how often we say, "Yes, but ah er." Or if we do not say it, we think it, and try to make the progress of the person or church not so much greater than our own after all. Why is this? Because we envy. And why do we envy? Because we have not love, and not having love we are ciphers in God's sight.

4. The fourth mark of love is that it "vaunteth not itself." There is no surer mark of the absence of love and the dominance of selfishness than that we talk about ourselves and our achievements. If we really love, the achievements of others will be more important to us than our own, and it is about them we will talk, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.

5. The fifth mark of love is that it is "not puffed up." It is quite possible for one to have good sense enough not to vaunt himself, and yet in his heart be puffed up over his own virtues or victories. But love is not even puffed up. Love is so much taken up with the excellencies of others that it will not even dream of being inflated over its own.

6. The sixth mark of love is that it "doth not behave itself unseemly," i.e. doth not do rude, ill-mannered, boorish things. Love is considerate of the feelings of others and therefore avoids all that might offend or shock them. Nothing else will teach good manners and true etiquette as love will. Those professed Christians who delight in trampling all conventionalities under foot and playing the boor are utterly lacking in one essential thing, love.

7. "Love seeketh not its own." These words need little comment. They demand exemplification rather than elucidation. It does, however, suggest a question. The question is a personal one: Are you seeking your own, or others good? You haven't time to think it out now, but I hope you will get your Bible and think it out when you get home.

8. "Love is not provoked." The translators of the King James Version seem to have staggered at this statement, and so inserted a qualifying word, "love is not easily provoked." But that is not what God said. "Love is not provoked" was the statement. Love knows no irritation. It is often grieved, deeply grieved, but never irritated. How searching these words are! We get so hot over the unkind words that are spoken to us. I think some of us, as we read these words, will ask, "Have I any love? Am I not sounding brass or a clanging cymbal?"

9. "Love taketh no account of evil." Love never puts the wrong done it down in its books or in its memory. Some of us do. Some one does us an injustice or a wrong of some kind and we store it away in mind, and whenever we think of that person we think of the wrong they did us. That is not love. Love takes those pages of memory on which the wrongs done us are written and tears them up. If wrong is done it, it keeps no account of it.

10. Love "rejoiceth not in unrighteousness." It is not for ever telling and glorying in the wrong that exists in individuals and church and state. Brethren, why is it that some of us are so fond of dwelling on the evil that exists in church and state? I will tell you, we do not love.

11. Love "rejoiceth with the truth." Oh, if we love how our hearts will bound when we discover truth in others. How gladly we will call attention to it. This is a sure mark of love. Let me ask a question, Are you much given to that sort of thing? Some of you come and tell me this wrong and that wrong that you see in others. Don't you think it would be well to come occasionally and tell me of this excellence or that that you have discovered in others? Paul says that is the way love behaves.

12. "Love beareth all things." The word translated "beareth" means primarily "covereth" and may mean so here, though the New Testament usage is against it. That, however, will be quite true, love is always covering evil up. We are told in 1 Pet. 4:8 that "love covereth a multitude of sins." The word translated covereth in this case is an entirely different one, however, from the one used in the passage before us. Love does not go round telling all the sin it has discovered in men, it hides it. That is a manifestation of love greatly needed in our day. But the words before us seem to mean more than that. They seem to mean that no matter what evil is done love, love bears it without revenge or complaint or bitterness or resentment.

13. "Love believeth all things." How proud some of us are of our powers to see through men and of the impossibility of gulling us. But that is not love, that is selfish shrewdness. Love is far greater than shrewdness. Love is very easily gulled. Indeed love would rather be gulled a hundred times than to misjudge once. "Love believeth all things," and when love has been deceived once it goes right on believing next time. We have heard it said of some men that they were forever being taken in by designing persons. Well, that speaks well for them, for

"love believeth all things."

14. "Love hopeth all things." When it gets beyond believing, when one has proved a deceiver so often and is so manifestly a deceiver still that believing is simply impossible, then love hopes for the future. Love does not look at the bad as they now are, but as they may become by the transforming grace of God. When love looks at a drunkard, it does not see that poor, bloated, vile, enslaved thing that now is. It sees the clean, upright, intelligent, Christ-like man of God that is to be. When love looks at the troublesome Sunday School scholar it does not see the shameless, vicious, unreasonable, almost idiotic boy that now is, but the attentive, obedient, gentlemanly boy that is to be. I tell you, friends, love is a great thing, but I fear it is a rare commodity.

15. Now comes the fifteenth and last mark of all, "Love endureth all things." When believing is impossible, when even hoping seems utterly out of the question, love endures. It does not get angry, it does not give up, it loves on, works on, endures on. Let Jesus serve as an illustration. How long Jesus has borne with men, but for love He has gotten back only reproach and sneers and spitting and blows and crucifixion. Reproach has broken His heart, and He is fast dying, but He summons all His waning strength, and cries, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:24). That was love.

Friends, let me ask you a question again. Examined in the light of the fifteen marks of love Paul gives, have you much love? Have you any? If not, whatever else you may have, you are nothing.

III. LOVE EXALTED, OR THE PEERLESS PRE-EMINENCE OF LOVE.

We have no time left for the third division of the chapter, Love Exalted, or the Peerless Pre-eminence of Love. To sum it all up in a few words, prophecies, tongues, knowledge, have their day, love is eternal. God is love, and love partakes of His eternal nature. "Love never faileth." If you want something that will last, get love. All other things are partial, love is complete, perfect. There are three abiding things, faith, hope and love, but even of these three, the greatest is love.