

“The greatest of these is love”

The last three weeks, we have heard about the truth, which God reveals to us in his Word, about faith, through which we believe God’s Word and trust that Jesus Christ’s salvation applies to me personally, and finally about Christian hope, the sure expectation of the future based upon the promises of God. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that faith, hope and love remain. They will remain because these things characterize the life of the Christian, even after the Lord Jesus returns and everything is renewed. Faith and hope are fundamentally acts of trust in God, resting in his promises. We will continue to do that in the new world; then we will have perfect faith and perfect hope.

Now the point Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 13 is that while faith and hope are very important, yet they are not the greatest for the greatest of these three is love. Paul shows this at the beginning of this chapter. If there is someone who can speak in tongues, in various languages of men and even of angels, but that person does not have love, then he is only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. He may do very spectacular things but if it is not done in love, it is only irritating and unhelpful. If there is someone who knows everything and has a very strong faith, a faith that can move mountains but he does not have love, then he is nothing and all his faith is of no help to him. And if there is someone who gives everything he has to the poor and is willing to die the death of a martyr but has not love, then he does not gain anything and all those good deeds are worthless.

Love is the fundamental Christian virtue and must characterize how the Christian lives. The word “love” can be confusing because there are many who do not have a biblical understanding of love. Love is often understood to refer to romantic love or to those warm fuzzy feelings which can often be inward focused rather than outward directed and considering the needs of others. Love as understood in our society is often a means for self gratification and instant pleasure. But the Lord teaches us that real love is fundamentally different, also when it is romantic love. True love finds its joy in the other and does not aim to give gratification to oneself. And when Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians about love, he does not mean romantic love, however good and God-pleasing that is in its proper context. He is speaking about love in the broadest possible sense, as the fundamental attitude which must characterize the Christian.

When the Lord Jesus commands us, who believe in him, to love, then he gives his love for us as the example for us to follow. Jesus showed to us what it really means to love. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was willing to pay the ultimate price and suffer under the weight of God’s eternal wrath in order to deliver us from our sins. That is love. The Son of God was willing to leave the glory he had with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity and become a servant and take on our human nature. That is love. That is true self-sacrifice. And he did this not

because we were such nice and good people but he did this for us when we were his enemies. He showed this love to those who rebelled against him and his Father for we are all sinners by nature and are still prone to sin. That is true love. The apostle John writes in his first letter in chapter 3:16, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ lay down his life for us.” He gave of himself in the most complete way possible. He endured unspeakable suffering in order to deliver us from our sins against the Most High majesty of God. What an amazing and incredible testimony to the grace, compassion and love of our Redeemer!

True and lasting love consists of selfless service to others. Living a life of love means living a life which is completely selfless, a life which strives to give and share for the benefit of everyone around us, no matter who they are. Living a life of love means putting the well-being of others above ourselves.

Paul gives us a beautiful description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Cor 13:4-8a).

What is striking about this description of love is that it is clearly set in a fallen and sinful world. Love is not idealized as doing spectacular, wonderful things. Rather love is dealing patiently with those around us who are less than perfect, just like we ourselves are as well. Love is an attitude of understanding, not of superiority. When we are offended or hurt, then we are not to bristle and retaliate, getting even with those who have hurt us. Instead we are to show patience and kindness. Even in the face of injustice done to us, we show grace and mercy, just as God has done for us. God is very patient and long suffering with us who are sinners and therefore we are to act likewise.

Love does not envy others but rejoices in the gifts, talents and good things the other may enjoy. It does not selfishly groan and complain because we don't have the same riches or possessions but focuses on the well-being of the other. Love is humble and therefore does not boast and brag. Love does not draw attention to itself and is not proud. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled. The one who loves is not full of himself but, on the contrary, is eager to serve the other and exalt him or her. Humility and meekness are the companions of love and are all pleasing to the Lord.

Love is not rude because it esteems others and does not neglect to show respect and honour to them. Love is not easily angered because it is patient and kind. Love always has the best interests of the other at heart and follows the example of Jesus Christ who asked his heavenly Father to forgive those who crucified him because they did not know what they were

doing (Luke 23:34). Love does not keep a record of wrongs but covers over a multitude of sins. Do not remember all the insults others can inflict on you but overlook them.

Love has a great capacity for suffering and bears all things. Love believes the best about others and is not suspicious or cynical. Love hopes the best of others on the basis of the redeeming power of Christ who renews us through his Spirit. Love always perseveres and endures to the end, even in the most difficult circumstances. Love will not fail. Do not give up in your day to day life to show this love.

This is Christian love in action. It is Christian love because it follows the example of Jesus Christ. Live in this way and then you will show what it means to believe in Jesus and make his way of love your own way more and more as you grow in faith and make his salvation your own. God has commanded us to love him and our neighbour with everything we have. He has first loved us and rescued us from sin and hatred so that we might serve him, love him and love our fellow human beings to the praise of his glory. All praise and adoration be to him who loved us and bought us with the precious blood of Jesus Christ his beloved Son!