

Paul's Praise of Christian Love - 1 Corinthians 13

by Martin Luther

Paul's purpose in this chapter is to silence and humble haughty Christians, particularly teachers and preachers. The Gospel gives much knowledge of God and of Christ, and conveys many wonderful gifts, as Paul recounts in Romans 12 and in First Corinthians 12. He tells us some have the gift of speaking, some of teaching, some of Scripture exposition; others of ruling; and so on. With Christians are great riches of spiritual knowledge, great treasures in the way of spiritual gifts. Manifest to all is the meaning of God, Christ, conscience, the present and the future life, and similar things. But there are to be found few indeed who make the right use of such gifts and knowledge; who humble themselves to serve others, according to the dictates of love. Each seeks his own honor and advantage, desiring to gain preferment and precedence over others.

We see today how the Gospel has given to men knowledge beyond anything known in the world before, and has bestowed upon them new capabilities. Various gifts have been showered upon and distributed among them which have redounded to their honor. But they go on unheeding. No one takes thought how he may in Christian love serve his fellow-men to their profit. Each seeks for himself glory and honor, advantage and wealth. Could one bring about for himself the distinction of being the sole individual learned and powerful in the Gospel, all others to be insignificant and useless, he would willingly do it; he would be glad could he alone be regarded as Mister Smart. At the same time he affects deep humility, great self-abasement, and preaches of love and faith. But he would take it hard had he, in practice, to touch with his little finger what he preaches. This explains why the world is so filled with fanatics and schismatics, and why every man would master and outrank all others. Such as these are haughtier than those that taught them. Paul here attacks these vainglorious spirits, and judges them to be wholly insignificant, though their knowledge may be great and their gifts even greater, unless they should humble themselves and use their gifts in the service of others.

To these coarse and mean people he addresses himself with a multitude of words and a lengthy discourse, a subject he elsewhere disposes of in a few words; for instance, where he says (Phil 2, 3-4), "In lowliness of mind each counting others better than himself; not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others." By way of illustration, he would pass sentence upon himself should he be thus blameworthy; this more forcibly to warn others who fall far short of his standing. He says,

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels."

That is, though I had ability to teach and to preach with power beyond that of any man or angel, with words of perfect charm, with truth and excellence informing my message--though I could do this, "but have not love [charity]," and only seek my own honor and profit and not my neighbor's, "I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal." In other words, "I might, perhaps, thereby teach others something, might fill their ears with sound, but before God I would be nothing." As a clock or a bell has not power to hear its own sound, and does not derive benefit from its stroke, so the preacher who lacks love cannot himself understand anything he says, nor does he thereby improve his standing before God. He has much knowledge, indeed, but because he fails to place it in the service of love, it is the quality of his knowledge that is at fault. I Cor 8, 1-12. Far better he were dumb or devoid of eloquence, if he but teach in love and meekness, than to speak as an angel while seeking but his own interests.

"And if I have the gift of prophecy."

According to chapter 14, to prophesy is to be able, by the Holy Spirit's inspiration, correctly to understand and explain the prophets and the Scriptures. This is a most excellent gift. To "know mysteries" it to be able to apprehend the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures, or its allegorical references, as Paul does where (Gal 4, 24-31) he makes Sarah and Hagar representative of the two covenants, and Isaac and Ishmael of the two peoples--the Jews and the Christians. Christ does the same (Jn 3, 14) when he makes the brazen serpent of Moses typical of himself on the cross; again, when Isaac, David, Solomon and other characters of sacred history appear as figures of Christ. Paul calls it "mystery"--this hidden, secret meaning beneath the primary sense of the narrative. But "knowledge" is the understanding of practical matters, such as Christian liberty, or the realization that the conscience is not bound. Paul would say, then: "Though one may understand the Scriptures, both in their obvious and their hidden sense; though he may know all about Christian liberty and a proper conversation; yet if he have not love, if he does not with that knowledge serve his neighbor, it is all of no avail whatever; in God's sight he is nothing."

Note how forcibly yet kindly Paul restrains the disgraceful vice of vainglory. He disregards even those exalted gifts, those gifts of exceeding refinement, charm and excellence, which naturally produce pride and haughtiness though they command the admiration and esteem of men. Who would not suppose the Holy Spirit to dwell visibly where such wisdom, such discernment of the Scriptures, is present? Paul's two epistles to the Corinthians are almost wholly directed against this particular vice, for it creates much mischief where it has sway. In Titus 1, 7, he names first among the virtues of a bishop that he be "non superbus," not haughty. In other words that he does not exalt himself because of his office, his honor and his understanding, and despise others in comparison. But strangely Paul says,

"If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

LOVE THE SPIRIT'S FRUIT RECEIVED BY FAITH.

We hold, and unquestionably it is true, that it is faith which justifies and cleanses. Rom 1, 17; 10, 10; Acts 15, 9. But if it justifies and purifies, love must be present. The Spirit cannot but impart love together with faith. In fact, where true faith is, the Holy Spirit dwells; and where the Holy Spirit is, there must be love and every excellence. How is it, then, Paul speaks as if faith without love were possible? We reply, this one text cannot be understood as subverting and militating against all those texts which ascribe justification to faith alone. Even the sophists have not attributed justification to love, nor is this possible, for love is an effect, or fruit, of the Spirit, who is received through faith.

Three answers may be given to the question. First, Paul has not reference here to the Christian faith, which is inevitably accompanied by love, but to a general faith in God and his power. Such faith is a gift; as, for instance, the gift of tongues, the gift of knowledge, of prophecy, and the like. There is reason to believe Judas performed miracles in spite of the absence of Christian faith, according to John 6, 70: "One of you is a devil." This general faith, powerless to justify or to cleanse, permits the old man with his vices to remain, just as do the gifts of intellect, health, eloquence, riches.

A second answer is: Though Paul alludes to the true Christian faith, he has those in mind who have indeed attained to faith and performed miracles with it, but fall from grace through pride, thus losing their faith. Many begin but do not continue. They are like the seed in stony ground. They soon fall from faith. The temptations of vainglory are mightier than those of adversity. One who has the true faith and is at the same time able to perform miracles is likely to seek and to accept honor with such eagerness as to fall from both love and faith.

A third answer is: Paul in his effort to present the necessity of love, supposes an impossible condition. For instance, I might express myself in this way: "Though you were a god, if you lacked patience you would

be nothing." That is, patience is so essential to divinity that divinity itself could not exist without it, a proposition necessarily true. So Paul's meaning is, not that faith could exist without love, but on the contrary, so much is love an essential of faith that even mountain-moving faith would be nothing without love, could we separate the two even in theory.

The third answer pleases me by far the best, though I do not reject the others, particularly the first. For Paul's very first premise is impossible--"if I speak with the tongues of angels." To speak with an angelic tongue is impossible for a human being, and he clearly emphasizes this impossibility by making a distinction between the tongues of men and those of angels. There is no angelic tongue; while angels may speak to us in a human tongue men can never speak in those of angels.

As we are to understand the first clause--"If I speak with the tongues of angels"--as meaning, Were it as possible as it is impossible for me to speak with the tongues of angels; so are we to understand the second clause "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains"--to mean, Were it as possible as it is impossible to have such faith. Equally impossible is the proposition of understanding all mysteries, and we must take it to mean, Were it possible for one to understand all mysteries, which, however, it is not. John, in the last chapter of his Gospel, asserts that the world could not contain all the books which might be written concerning the things of the kingdom. For no man can ever fathom the depths of these mysteries. Paul's manner of expressing himself is but a very common one, such as: "Even if I were a Christian, if I believed not in Christ I would be nothing"; or, "Were you even a prince, if you neither ruled men nor possessed property you would be nothing."

"And if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor."

In other words, "Were I to perform all the good works on earth and yet had not charity- having sought therein only my own honor and profit and not my neighbor's--I would nevertheless be lost." In the performance of external works so great as the surrender of property and life, Paul includes all works possible of performance, for he who would at all do these, would do any work. Just so, when he has reference to tongues he includes all good words and doctrines; and in prophecy, understanding and faith he comprises all wisdom and knowledge. Some may risk body and property for the sake of temporal glory. So Romans and pagans have done; but as love was lacking and they sought only their own interests, they practically gave nothing. It being generally impossible for men to give away all their property, and their bodies to be burned, the meaning must "Were it possible for me to give all my goods to the poor, and my body to be burned."

The false reasoning of the sophists will not stand when they maliciously deduct from this text the theory that the Christian faith is not effectual to blot out sin and to justify. They say that before faith can justify it must be garnished with love; but justification and its distinctive qualities as well are beyond their ken. Justification of necessity precedes love. One does not love until he has become godly and righteous. Love does not make us godly, but when one has become godly love is the result. Faith, the Spirit and justification have love as effect and fruitage, and not as mere ornament and supplement. We maintain that faith alone justifies and saves. But that we may not deceive ourselves and put our trust in a false faith, God requires love from us as the evidence of our faith, so that we may be sure of our faith being real faith.

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN LOVE.

"Love suffereth long, and is kind."

Now Paul begins to mention the nature of love, enabling us to perceive where real love and faith are to be found. A haughty teacher does not possess the virtues the apostle enumerates. Lacking these, however

many gifts the haughty have received through the Gospel, they are devoid of love.

First, love "suffereth long." That is, it is patient; not sudden and swift to anger, not hasty to exercise revenge, impatience or blind rage. Rather it bears in patience with wicked and the infirm until they yield. Haughty teachers can only judge, condemn and despise others, while justifying and exalting themselves.

Second, love is "kind." In other words, it is pleasant to deal with; is not of forbidding aspect; ignores no one; is kind to all men, in words, acts and attitude.

Third, love "envieth not"--is not envious nor displeased at the greater prosperity of others; grudges no one property or honor. Haughty teachers, however, are envious and unkind. They begrudge everyone else both honor and possessions. Though with their lips they may pretend otherwise, these characteristics are plainly visible in their deeds.

Fourth, love "vaunteth not itself." It is averse to knavery, to crafty guile and double-dealing. Haughty and deceptive spirits cannot refrain from such conduct, but love deals honestly and uprightly and face to face.

Fifth, love is not "puffed up," as are false teachers, who swell themselves up like adders.

Sixth, love "doth not behave itself unseemly" after the manner of the passionate, impatient and obstinate, those who presume to be always in the right, who are opposed to all men and yield to none, and who insist on submission from every individual, otherwise they set the world on fire, bluster and fume, shriek and complain, and thirst for revenge. That is what such inflating pride and haughtiness of which we have just spoken lead to.

Seventh, love "seeketh not her own." She seeks not financial advancement; not honor, profit, ease; not the preservation of body and life. Rather she risks all these in her is no such thing as the Church of Christ nor as true Christians. Many erring spirits, especially strong pretenders to [ed. the text abruptly ends here]

Eighth, love "is not [easily] provoked" by wrong and ingratitude; it is meek. False teachers can tolerate nothing; they seek only their own advantage and honor, to the injury of others.

Ninth, love "taketh not account of [thinketh no] evil." It is not suspicious; it puts the best construction on everything and takes all in good faith. The haughty, however, are immeasurably suspicious; always solicitous not to be underrated, they put the worst construction on everything, as Joab construed Abner's deeds. 2 Sam 3, 25. This is a shameful vice, and they who are guilty of it are hard to handle.

Tenth, love "rejoiceth not in unrighteousness [iniquity]." The words admit of two interpretations: First, as having reference to the delight of an individual in his own evil doings. Solomon (Prov 2, 14) speaks of those who "rejoice to do evil." Such must be either extremely profligate and shameless, characters like harlots and knaves; or else they must be hypocrites, who do not appreciate the wickedness of their conduct; characters like heretics and schismatics, who rejoice when their knavery succeeds under the name of God and of the truth. I do not accept this interpretation, but the other. Paul's meaning is that false teachers are malicious enough to prefer to hear, above all things, that some other does wrong, commits error and is brought to shame; and their motive is simply that they themselves may appear upright and godly. Such was the attitude of the pharisee toward the publican, in the Gospel. But love's compassion reaches far beyond its own sins, and prays for others.

Eleventh, love "rejoiceth with [in] the truth." Here is evidence that the preceding phrase is to be taken as having reference to malicious rejoicing at another's sin and fall. Rejoicing in the truth is simply exulting in the right-doing and integrity of another. Similarly, love is grieved at another's wrong-doing. But to the

haughty it is an affliction to learn of uprightness in someone else; for they imagine such integrity detracts from their own profit and honor.

Twelfth, love "beareth all things." It excuses every failing in all men, however weak, unjust or foolish one may be apparently, and no one can be guilty of a wrong too great for it to overlook. But none can do right in the eyes of the haughty, who ever find something to belittle and censure as beyond toleration, even though they must hunt up an old fence to find the injury.

Thirteenth, love "believeth all things." Paul does not here allude to faith in God, but to faith in men. His meaning is: Love is of decidedly trustful disposition. The possessor of it believes and trusts all men, considering them just and upright like himself. He anticipates no wily and crooked dealing, but permits himself to be deceived, deluded, flouted, imposed upon, at every man's pleasure, and asks, "Do you really believe men so wicked?" He measures all other hearts by his own, and makes mistakes with utmost cheerfulness. But such error works him no injury. He knows God cannot forsake, and the deceiver of love but deceives himself. The haughty, on the contrary, trust no one, will believe none, nor brook deception.

Fourteenth, love "hopeth all things." Love despairs of no man, however wicked he may be. It hopes for the best. As implied here, love says, "We must, indeed, hope for better things." It is plain from this that Paul is not alluding to hope in God. Love is a virtue particularly representing devotion to a neighbor; his welfare is its goal in thought and deed. Like its faith, the hope entertained by love is frequently misplaced, but it never gives up. Love rejects no man; it despairs of no cause. But the proud speedily despair of men generally, rejecting them as of no account.

Fifteenth, love "endureth all things." It endures whatever harm befalls, whatever injury it suffers; it endures when its faith and hope in men have been misplaced; endures when it sustains damage to body, property or honor. It knows that no harm has been done since it has a rich God. False teachers, however, bear with nothing, least of all with perfidy and the violation of plighted faith.

Sixteenth, love never faileth; that means, it abides forever, also in the life to come. It never gives up, never permits itself to be hindered or defeated by the wickedness or ingratitude of men, as do worldly individuals and false saints, who, immediately on perceiving contempt or ingratitude, draw back, unwilling to do further good to any, and, rendering themselves quite inhuman, become perfect misanthropes like Timon in his reputation among the Greeks. Love does not do so. It permits not itself to be made wicked by the wickedness of men, nor to be hindered in well-doing. It continues to do good everywhere, teaching and admonishing, aiding and serving, notwithstanding its services and benefits must be rewarded, not by good, but by evil. Love remains constant and immovable; it continues, it endures, in this earthly life and also in the life to come. The apostle adds, "Whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall be done away." Love he commends above all other endowments, as a gift that can never pass, even in the life to come. Those other gifts, the boast of the false apostles, are bestowed only for this present life, to serve in the administering of the ministerial office. Prophecy, tongues, knowledge, all must cease; for in yonder life each individual will himself perceive perfectly and there will be no need for one to teach another. Likewise, all differences, all inequalities, shall be no more. No knowledge and no diversity of gifts is necessary; God himself will be all in every soul. I Cor 15, 28.

Here Paul gives utterance to the distinction between the life of faith here below and that heavenly life of divine vision. He would teach that we have in this life and the other the same possession, for it is the same God and the same treasures which we have here by faith and there by sight. In the objects themselves there is no difference; the difference consists in our knowledge. We have the same God in both lives, but in different manner of possession. The mode of possessing God in this life is faith. Faith is an imperfect, obscure vision, which makes necessary the Word, which, in turn, receives vogue through the ministry,

tongues and prophecy. Without the Word, faith cannot live. But the mode of possessing God in the future life is not faith but sight. This is perfect knowledge, rendering unnecessary the Word, and likewise preaching, tongues and prophecy. These, then, must pass. Paul continues,

"We know in part, and we prophesy in part."

"We know in part"; that is, in this life we know imperfectly, for it is of faith and not of sight. And we "prophesy in part"; that is, imperfectly, for the substance of our prophecy is the Word and preaching. Both knowledge and prophecy, however, reveal nothing short of what the angels see--the one God. "But when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away."

He proves this by way of illustration and contrasts the child with the man. To children, who are yet weak, play is a necessity; it is a substitute for office and work. Similarly, we in the present life are far too frail to behold God. Until we are able, it is necessary that we should use the medium of Word and faith, which are adapted to our limitations.

"For now we see in a mirror [through a glass] darkly; but then face to face."

Faith, Paul tells us, is like a mirror, like a riddle. The actual face is not in the glass; there is but the image of it. Likewise, faith gives us, not the radiant countenance of eternal Deity, but a mere image of him, an image derived through the Word. As a dark riddle points to something more than it expresses, so faith suggests something clearer than that which it perceives. But in the life to come, mirror and riddle, faith and its demonstration, shall all have ceased to be. God's face and our own shall be mutually and clearly revealed. Paul says, "Now I know in part; but then shall I know fully even as also I was fully known [know even also as I am known]." That is, God now knows me perfectly, clearly and plainly; no dark veil is upon myself. But as to him, a dark veil hides him from me. With the same perfect clearness wherewith he now knows me, I shall then know him--without a veil. The veil shall be taken away, not from him, but from me; for upon him is no veil.

THE GREATEST CHRISTIAN VIRTUE IS LOVE.

"But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

The sophists have transgressed in a masterly manner as regards this verse. They have made faith vastly inferior to love because of Paul's assertion that love is greater than faith and greater than hope. As usual, their mad reason blindly seizes upon the literal expression. They hack a piece out of it and the remainder they ignore. Thus they fail to understand Paul's meaning; they do not perceive that the sense of Paul concerning the greatness of love is expressed both in the text and the context. For surely it cannot be disputed that the apostle is here referring to the permanent or temporary character respectively of love and other gifts, and not to their rank or power. As to rank, faith only, but the Word, surpasses love; for the Word is the power of God unto salvation to all that believe. Rom 1,16. Yet the Word must pass. But though love is the fruit of the Word and its effect, it shall never be abolished. Faith possesses God himself. It possesses and can accomplish things; yet it must cease. Love gives and blesses the neighbor, as a result of faith, and it shall never be done away.

Now, Paul's statement that love is greater than faith and hope is intended as an expression of the permanence, or eternal duration, of love. Faith, being limited as to time comparison with love, ranks beneath it for the reason this temporary duration. With the same right I might say that the kingdom of Christ is greater upon earth than Christ. Thereby I do not mean that the Church in itself better and of higher rank than Christ, but merely that covers a greater part of the earth than he compassed; he was here

but three years and those he spent in a limited sphere, whereas his kingdom has been from the beginning and is coextensive with the earth. In this sense, love is longer and broader than either faith or hope. Faith deals with God merely in the heart and in this life, whereas relations of love both to God and the whole world are eternal. Nevertheless, as Christ is immeasurably better and higher and more precious than the Christian Church, though we behold him moving in smaller limits and as a mere individual, so is faith better, higher and more precious than love, though its duration is limited and it has God alone for its object.

Paul's purpose in thus extolling love is to deal a blow to false teachers and to bring to naught their boasts about faith and other gifts when love is lacking. His thought is: "If ye possess not love, which abides fore, all else whereof ye boast being perishable, ye will perish with it. While the Word of God, and spiritual gifts, are eternal, yet the external office and proclamation of Word, and likewise the employment of gifts in their variety shall have an end, and thus your glory and pride shall become as ashes." So, then, faith justifies through the Word and produces love. But while both Word and faith shall pass, righteousness and love, which they effect, abide forever; just as a building erected by the aid of scaffolding remains after the scaffolding has been removed.

Observe how small the word "love" and how easily uttered! Who would have thought to find so much precious virtue and power ascribed by Paul to this one excellence as counterpart of so much that is evil? This is, I imagine, magnifying love, painting love. It is a better discourse on virtue and vice than are the heathen writings. The model the apostle presents should justly shame the false teachers, who talk much of love but in whom not one of the virtues he mentions is found.

Every quality of love named by him means false teachers buffeted and assaulted. Whenever he magnifies love and characterizes her powers, he invariably makes at the same time a thrust at those who are deficient in any of them. Well may we, then, as he describes the several features, add the comment "But you do very differently."

It is passing strange that teachers devoid of love should possess such gifts as Paul has mentioned here, viz., speaking with tongues, prophesying, understanding mysteries; that they should have faith, should bestow their goods and suffer themselves to be burned. For we have seen what abominations ensue where love is lacking; such individuals are proud, envious, puffed up, impatient, unstable, false, venomous, suspicious, malicious, disdainful, bitter, disinclined to service, distrustful, selfish, ambitious and haughty. How can it consistently be claimed that people of this stamp can, through faith, remove mountains, give their bodies to be burned, prophesy, and so on? It is precisely as I have stated. Paul presents an impossible proposition, implying that since they are devoid of love, they do not really possess those gifts, but merely assume the name and appearance. And in order to divest them of those he admits for the sake of argument that they are what in reality they are not.