

GOD’S WORD ON THE EXCELLENCIES OF LOVE

1 Corinthians 13: 13

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Congregation of the Lord,

“Love” is a beautiful word.

It stirs up fond memories of father and mother, of husband or wife.

And, if it is spiritually well with us, it should also stir up fond memories, especially of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In our text chapter, God’s Word praises the excellencies of love, which, in the Authorised Version, is translated as “*charity*” but which we may also translate as “love.”

This hour, we are called to examine why our text considers love to be the greatest, greater even than faith and hope.

Let us do so by the following theme and division ...

GOD’S WORD ON THE EXCELLENCIES OF LOVE

1. The Superiority Of This Love

2. The Beginnings Of This Love

3. The Characteristics Of This Love

Congregation,

The Apostle Paul has written a letter to the congregation in Corinth, where believers have not conducted themselves very lovingly.

Apparently, the sin of pride has taken hold of some of the people ... pride, because they were in possession of certain spiritual gifts, particularly the gift of speaking in tongues.

According to these people, speaking in tongues was superior to all other spiritual gifts.

Consequently, those who had this gift had begun to distance themselves from others in the congregation and had begun to show an unloving attitude.

Such an attitude had sparked jealousy and rivalry within the congregation, making it difficult for people to get along.

Although the congregation of Corinth was rich in a number of spiritual gifts, the one thing that was lacking was love.

The Apostle Paul, therefore, wishing to remedy this situation, reminds the believers in Corinth of love's superiority.

He therefore wrote this chapter 13 in the hope and prayer that he could show them that if they do not love one

another, they are failing miserably as believers.

This is explained in the first 3 verses of our text-chapter, where he says as it were, “If I speak in tongues and make much noise which no one can understand, and centre myself out in that way, I am nothing but a brass gong or a clanging cymbal.”

“Without love for the other, your show of Christianity is meaningless, and your Christianity rings hollow.”

The Apostle then goes on to show that this goes for all the other spiritual gifts as well ... if a person can prophesy as no one else can, or if a person has the gift of faith to be able to perform miracles, but does not have love, he might think he is something, but in reality, he is nothing.

If a person has the gifts of hospitality and generosity, so that everyone says of her, “What a wonderful person she is, but if she is doing it merely to make a name for herself, and not from the motive of love, it will profit her nothing.

Even if I would sacrifice my body for this or that cause ... if I don't do it through love, even all my sacrifices will profit me nothing.

Now, let us be sure that we understand God's Word correctly.

It does not say that we may forget about all those other gifts, but it says that if love is not mixed in with all those other gifts.

If love is not the driving force behind the exercise of those gifts, then they are hollow.

If love is absent, you might do many fabulous things, but then something of superior necessity is still absent.

So, dear people!

The question for us is not in the first place if we have a certain talent or gift, but rather, if we have love.

You could be a gifted person, but if the love that we have been talking about does not shine through your gifts, your gifts will not bring praise to God, nor will they edify the congregation.

The congregation of Corinth had many gifted people – smart people – influential people, but the apostle was concerned that if love was not put into practice very soon, the congregation would come to ruin.

Allow me to make some application.

We, too, have gifted people in our congregation.

Some of those gifts have already been discovered; some still need to be discovered.

But should we not also emphasise, first and foremost, the necessity of the gift of love?

Should love not be the greatest gift in exercise and have the greatest influence amongst us?

The Bible teaches that it should be.

Love is to have the superior staying power throughout the congregation, in our homes, in our church, at school, and at work.

And only when such love is present will all the other gifts begin to have real benefit around us.

God may have graced you with wonderful talents and gifts, but only when you exercise them in the spirit of love will they be blessed.

Therefore, based on what the Bible teaches here, let me counsel you to deploy your talents and gifts in the spirit of love.

Let the love of 1 Corinthians 13 be the motive force for all that you do and for all that you say.

This love is to be exercised amongst us in such measures that outsiders will be able to say of us, *“Behold, how they love one another!”*

The Bible exhorts us on many occasions to the exercise of this sort of love.

Jesus does so in John 15:17, *“These things I command you, that ye love one another.”*

The Apostle Peter says it on several occasions in his letters, *“Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently.”* (1 Peter 1:22) *“Love the brotherhood.”* (1 Peter 2:17) *“Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous.”* (1 Peter 3:8)

And so does the Apostle John ... *“And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.”* (1 John 3:23)

“And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.” (1 John 4:21)

So you see, it is not an insignificant matter that we are dealing with, this hour, and I hope that it proves the superiority of love.

I believe Psalm 133, according to Psalter 370, celebrates the superiority of such love when it says,

How good and pleasant in the sight When brethren make it their delight
To dwell in blest accord; Such love is like anointing oil
That consecrates for holy toil The servants of the Lord.

Such love in peace and joy distils, As o'er the slopes of Hermon's hills
Refreshing dew descends; The Lord commands His blessing there,
And they that walk in love shall share in life that never ends.

Love; its superiority must be honoured in your and my life ... *“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity (love).”*

But now, **secondly, let us consider the Beginnings of This Love.**

Congregation, love begins with God

Jesus Christ Himself teaches in Luke 10:27 that I am to love the Lord my God with all my heart, and with all my soul, and with all my strength, and on the basis of such love to the Lord my God I am to love my neighbour as myself.

First, there has to be love for the Lord God before there can be any genuine love in exercise towards my neighbour.

It has to be possible for you to confess with Psalm 116, “I love the Lord, the fount of life and grace,” if there is to be love towards your neighbour.

In our fallen nature, we do not harbour any love towards God.

Our fall into sin drained us of the love of God, and all that is left in our fallen state is an inclination to hate instead of love.

Our Heidelberg Catechism is quite correct when it teaches that man, by nature, is so corrupt that he is inclined to hate God and his neighbour.

This might not necessarily be a full-blown hatred, but the seeds are there, deep in the darkness of man's heart.

And there is only one remedy for this: a change is brought about, a miracle occurs, and man is born again ... or, as it is also stated, “born from above.”

Well, there is where we must look for the beginnings of love.

The love described in our text chapter does not have its beginnings on earth but in heaven.

The Bible says in John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever*

believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

God exercised love towards sinners drained of love and filled with seeds of hate, and gave His Son Jesus Christ, as it says in 1 John 4:10, *“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”*

And then we are told in Romans 5:8, *“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”*

This same love is seen in the act of Jesus Christ as He came into this world to sacrifice Himself for love-drained sinners.

Undoubtedly, the cross of Christ stands as the ultimate symbol of love demonstrated to sinners.

I believe that it was not so much the Jews and the Roman soldiers who put Jesus on the cross as it was His love for sinners.

It was not so much the nails that kept Jesus on the cross as it was His love to save sinners from their seeds of hatred.

This love of Christ, dear people, is to be obtained as the Holy Spirit brings it across to you and me by Word and Gospel

This sinner-seeking love is, undoubtedly, in exercise at this moment as the Word of the Gospel is proclaimed.

God once said that His Word would not return to Him without accomplishing its mission and purpose.

Perhaps the Spirit and that Word are knocking on someone’s heart this hour.

Perhaps it is already a very hard heart, hardened by many acts of sin.

Perhaps it is your heart!

What does God want of you?

It is clearly spelled out in the Bible ... God wants you to repent of your sins by confessing that those seeds of hatred are also to be found in you.

God wants you to believe on His Son Jesus Christ whom He has given as the one and only Saviour.

God so loved the world that He sent His Son ... and my friend ... if you will not believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, I’m afraid that you will die in your sin.

If the love of God does not move you to accept this word, I wonder what will!

But if you have believed in Jesus Christ, you have the beginnings of love towards God and towards your

neighbour.

And to know if you have those beginnings of love towards your neighbour, it will be helpful to consider **The Characteristics Of This Love**, as I wish to draw your attention to this in the third place.

Sing: Psalter 370:1-2

Now, since this chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, teaches that love is the greatest, ... even greater than faith and hope, it is understandable that this chapter devotes some considerable time to describe some characteristics of this love.

And the reason for this is understandable as well, because you and I need to know how such love towards our neighbour should come to expression.

Let the Holy Spirit, using our text chapter, be our Teacher.

We are told that love suffers long, which means that it is patient.

It can show patience without becoming upset.

It keeps the weaknesses and shortcomings of others in mind and practices tolerance.

The highest form of this characteristic of love is to be found with God, when we are asked in Romans 2:4, *“Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?”*

Whoever has learned something of God’s longsuffering and patience by experience will also want to practice it on others.

We are told that love is kind.

Are you a kind person?

It is so refreshing to meet a man or a woman who is kind.

The word itself conveys a sense of comfort, peace, and trust in a person who is kind.

Kindness takes time to practice; even little tokens of kindness take time.

Kindness must be practised towards everyone, and even towards those who have hurt or injured us.

Jesus once showed great kindness to Judas Iscariot ... a man who ultimately betrayed Him.

With kindness, He could say to His betrayer, “Friend, why have you come?”

Love is kind ... towards relatives and friends ... but also towards others.

We are told that love envies not, which means that it does not become jealous; It does not envy the greater privileges, talents, and gifts that others may possess.

Where there is envy, love is absent.

This was the case with Cain, for instance.

He was envious of the sacrifice that his brother Abel brought, which was accepted by God.

And his envy led him to hate his brother enough to kill him.

We are told that love does not vaunt itself, which means that it makes no parade of itself.

It does not show off or boast or brag; it is not proud or conceited.

Some of the Pharisees of Jesus' day lacked this characteristic of love.

They regularly displayed their intellectual superiority and distinctive religious customs.

We are told that love is not puffed up, which means literally that it is not contemptuous of others.

It is part of human nature to look down on others.

Even believers are caught doing this sometimes.

But love esteems others better than themselves; love always thinks the best of others; it will seek out a quality in the other person and praise the person for it.

It is one of those characteristics of love that often does wonders for a marriage.

We are told that love does not behave itself unseemly.

It is not rude or ill-mannered, but always courteous.

This is the sort of characteristic that is shown in the little, everyday things of life, like good manners.

We are told that love seeks not her own ... in other words, love is not selfish.

It is part of human nature to get what I want; I want what I need; I want what I desire; I want, I want, I want ...!

Those two words have often broken up a marriage and destroyed many relationships.

It is sometimes called "egoism."

Love, on the other hand, does not display egoism, is not selfish, but considers the needs of others before the needs of self.

We are told that love is not easily provoked.

This is quite a loaded characteristic.

It means being evenly tempered, not bad-tempered, or irritable or easily offended.

How often are we not offended by this or that?

“Yes, but”, you say, “people should be much more careful not to offend others!”

Ah, but the Bible also says that love is not easily provoked.

Love is not so easily and quickly offended.

You see, there are two sides to it; you should be careful not to cause offence, but you should also be careful not to take offence.

We are told that love thinks no evil, which means that it carries no long-standing feuds or digs up old differences.

A man or woman with such love does not remember the wrong done to them, but is most willing to forgive and forget.

What a marvellous characteristic of love this is that can do wonders for congregational life.

This characteristic is what forgiveness is all about.

We are told that love rejoices not in iniquity but rejoices in the truth.

In other words, love does not delight in exposing others' weaknesses.

It will weep over sin and be broken-hearted over failure.

It will condemn sin, but love will always yearn to bring a fallen creature back to God, and will rejoice in seeing him restored to God.

Isn't this what the angels in heaven do?

They rejoice over one sinner who repents ... and so should we.

We are told that love bears all things.

This means that it will suffer wrong without retaliation, just as Jesus did not retaliate when He was arrested, tried and crucified.

He took all the abuse and the injustices, and yet could pray from the cross, *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”*

We are told that love believes all things.

No, this does not mean that love is gullible, but it means that it is not suspicious.

It means that it is trusting – trusting, especially of everything God has revealed in His Word.

Are you that sort of a trusting person in your relationship to others, and in your relationship to God?

We are told that love hopes all things.

No one can entertain more hope than you, my fellow believer!

As believers, we are the only people who have a positive hope, always ready to give an answer to everyone who asks us for the reason for the hope that is in us.

By the grace of God, we are the people who can sing,

Our hope is on Jehovah stayed,

In Him our hearts are joyful made.

Lastly, we are told that love endures all things.

The suffering of this present time “*are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us*” so says the apostle Paul in Romans 8:18.

Love endures through trials and afflictions because it is rooted in Christ’s love. As the apostle Paul proclaims in Romans 8:38-39: “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Such love endures all things.

Well then, these are the characteristics of love, and should be evident in every believer.

And if it isn’t, admit it and confess it and work on it prayerfully that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ would replenish you with His love, so that you, in obedience to Him, can love Him with heart, soul, mind and strength, and the neighbour as yourself.

Amen