

# LOVE'S PRIORITY

by Allan A. MacRae, Ph.D.

## LOVE'S SUPREME IMPORTANCE

The first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13 stress the supreme importance of love. Following his reference in the previous chapter to various tongues the Apostle Paul says, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal." He is not just talking about people who can speak well and often don't say anything worthwhile. He is saying that no matter how much knowledge you have, or how tremendous is your ability to comprehend things, if you do not have love your knowledge is absolutely worthless. "Though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge."

He even says that no matter how much faith you have -- enough to remove mountains -- if you do not have love you are nothing. Then he speaks of charity in the modern sense: "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor." And of self-sacrifice: "Though I give my body to be burned." Though I am ready to die for what I believe in, and have not love, it profits me nothing. What tremendous superlatives Paul uses here! Yet there are people who just do not like to speak about this love, and who pass over the chapter. It is easy to understand why they do because the modernists have misused it. The modernists have used the word "love" as if it meant simply not standing for anything at all. Just being tolerant of wickedness, of evil, of unbelief. Well, that's certainly not what Paul had in mind by love.

When he says though I have all knowledge but have not love I

am nothing, he does not mean if you have some type of kindness and generosity and you ignore knowledge, that is the better way. He does not mean that at all. But this is the attitude that is so prevalent in our society today. I've heard it said, "Better to have ten criminals escape than to have one man unjustly punished." Well, it certainly is true you should not unjustly punish men who are not guilty. But you let ten criminals escape and you have 100 innocent people killed. That's not love. Not at all. Love demands you stand for something. True love will seek to have true knowledge. It will seek to speak it with power. It will denounce evil. It will stand for what is right. Often God's people have reacted against the modernists' misuse of the term by shunning its proper use.

For many years I was among people who if you spoke of love would immediately think you were getting soft. You were going off in the wrong direction. Certainly the word love is being misunderstood and misused, but that is no reason not to see its tremendous importance. Paul says that all these gifts -- apostles, teachers, wonderful knowledge, the ability to advance the gospel -- are all absolutely worthless if you do not have love.

Some things are temporary; other things are eternal. We are here in this life in order to allow God to develop within us certain qualities which He desires to have developed, and these can mostly be subsumed under this term "love." This term speaks of a true relation to God and to all His creatures. Having this love one is truly concerned for the very best interests of all involved. Of course it is not having a concern for the best interests of others

simply to let unbelief be widely spread. It is not in people's best interests to let them be led astray or be deprived of the opportunity to hear the Gospel. That is substituting softness and weakness for Biblical love. Many years ago I heard Dean Brown of Yale say that the pictures we have of Christ as the Good Shepherd caring for the sheep are wonderful and we should have them, but he said, "Why don't we have some pictures of Him with the staff driving away the bear and the lion that are going to kill the sheep?" True love is a matter of the heart and shows itself in both of these actions so it is of tremendous importance.

#### LOVE'S CHARACTERISTICS

In verses 4-7 Paul goes on to speak of the wonderful characteristics of love. Love is long suffering. We can take slights, insults, and slams for a little while, but soon we get fed up and strike back. Well, if our Lord is being attacked, we should strike back, but if the attack is on us then we should be long-suffering, not merely for a brief time.

Love is kind. True Christian love is kind to all. The Christian may have to fight some things that he strongly disapproves of, but he is personally kind and helpful to others.

Love vaunts not itself, is not puffed up. Pride is perhaps one of the very greatest of sins. Certainly one of the most widespread. It is very easy for anyone to fall into. But true love does not vaunt itself, is not puffed up.

And does not behave itself unseemly. It is not disorderly. It seeks proper order and proper ways of doing things. Here again this

does not mean that for the sake of proper order the Christian disregards standing for what is right.

Above all, love seeks not her own. How difficult that is for us. I've heard people laugh about the minister who get calls to two different churches, and feel that the Lord has led him to the one that pays the largest salary. Well, that may be the one the Lord wants him to take. We should not take the smaller opportunity for fear we are seeking our own. But neither should we take the larger position giving us the greater reward if the smaller one has a greater opportunity for service. True love looks out for God's desires and interests and for the welfare of other human beings.

Love is not easily provoked. How easy it is for most of us to be kind and gracious to those who are kind and gracious to us, but true love is not easily provoked.

Love thinks no evil in the sense of being always ready to criticize. Somebody sees a funny mistake or error another person has made and he takes delight in spreading it. It is a natural quality of fallen men to rejoice in the failure of others. Criticism of others spreads easily. True love will cover others' faults, not rejoicing in them but rejoicing in the truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Believing is having faith. This does not mean we should believe any kind of story we hear. It means we should believe all that is true. It means that true love encompasses faith, and hope. If you have true love it will be a love that "believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

## LOVE'S LASTING QUALITY

Finally verses 8-13 are about the lasting quality of love. Throughout the chapter Paul has been pointing out the contrast between the important activities we do and the all-important attitude behind them. He wants us to step out and accomplish the utmost we can for the Lord. This is vital even though it is temporary because it relates to this world. But what is most important is the attitude in back of all that we do. This makes what we do last. So Paul devotes these final verses to the contrast between those things that are important as relate to this world, and those developments of our character that God desires to last for eternity.

Love never fails. It goes on and on. It does not stop like a stream that dries up. This does not mean that if you have a loving attitude you are never going to fail in what you undertake. You may fail many times. But still love continues, it does not dry up.

Whether there are prophecies they will come to an end. God gives wonderful prophecies, wonderful teachings, but all the knowledge you can get is for this world. It does not last. When we get to eternity our knowledge will be extended so far beyond anything we can dream of in this world that what we have learned here will seem like nothing in comparison.

Whether there be tongues they shall cease just as everything which is purely of this world, and of life here will cease.

Whether there be knowledge it shall vanish away. Now we know in part. What we know in this life is only a tiny fraction of what

we will know eventually. It is important for us to get all the knowledge we can to use for the Lord. I happen to have the type of mind that just loves the acquisition of knowledge. Recently I've learned much more about the French Revolution than I ever knew before, but it has nothing to do with my present activities. I just love the acquisition of knowledge. But this is a temporary matter. What we will know in eternity is far beyond what we know here.

Here "we know in part and we prophecy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away." As children our ideas were very limited. "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." When we come into God's presence, all that we know now will seem like that. We will be many times as far beyond our present knowledge and understanding as we are now beyond what we were when we were children.

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly." We have only a small intimation of things. It is a tendency for human beings to take a few facts and to try to build a whole system of understanding of the universe about them. This is a human tendency. I don't care whether it is a Reformed view, or a Dispensational view or what group it is, the tendency is to take a few facts and then build a whole big system about it, and half of the system may be pure imagination. Let us take the facts of Scripture and stand on those facts and know that there are thousands of things we do not understand. But alas, those are the things people fight over!

Divisions are made over things that they cannot be sure about because Scripture is not positive concerning them. Now we see in a mirror, dimly.

We see certain things that are definite in Scripture. Let us stand on them. But let us be charitable. Let us not be dogmatic on things that are not stated with absolute clarity in the Scripture. God has given us certain definite duties in this age, certain things to stand for. Let us put our stress on those things that God stresses as primary.

The time is coming when we shall see face to face and know even as we are known. The development of these qualities descriptive of love will last throughout all eternity, whereas most of the things on which our activity has to be spent in this life are for this life and will end with this life. They will be replaced by that which goes far beyond them in the life beyond.

This is the great conclusion: "Now abide faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." The next chapter begins with, "Follow after love, and desire spiritual gifts." These spiritual gifts are important for our service. Paul has to devote the greater part of his attention to discussing them in connection with how we are going to make our lives count for the Lord. But that which abides is faith, hope, and love. These three things last. They endure. Our faith should be so rooted in God and built up in Christ that when we step out into eternity we will just go on with it.

Some interpret "that which is in part will be done away" to

mean: Now I go by faith, but then by sight. However, this does not mean that faith ends. Rather it means we will know a great deal more but we will still need our faith in God. This is one of the qualities He wants to build up that goes on into eternity. We will still need hope -- the recognition that God controls the future and we can trust Him in it all. This strong Biblical hope differs from our present use of the word which means a wish or guess.

Love is the greatest of these three because it comprehends that attitude of mind God desires to build up in us toward our friends and also toward those who mistreat us. Above all this attitude toward Christ gathers within itself true faith and true hope. In order to serve God effectively in this life we must always keep in mind the centrality of that which endures.■