The greatest of these is love

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Preacher: Prof J.Douglas Macmillan

[0:00] Will you turn with me to the portion of Scripture read, 1 Corinthians chapter 13. And I would like in this opening hour of conference to send their thoughts around the words of the last verse in 1 Corinthians 13.

1 Corinthians 13 and verse 13. And now abideth faith, hope, love. These three, but the greatest of these is love.
And especially these words, the greatest of these is love. The supremacy of love in the Christian life.
I wonder if you agree with Paul. I wonder if you agree with God. The story is told that once on a Saturday, the manse at Anworth long ago when Samuel Rutherford was ministered had a visitor. He arrived in the form of a wafering man. He was dressed just as a tramp. And he was given some food in the kitchen of the manse.
[1:20] And in the evening, the minister was told that this man was there. And the minister exhorted his servants to take him in that he might share in the family worship of this Saturday night.

And that was done. And it was Samuel Rutherford's habit. It would seem to, not just to read and sing and pray, but also to catechize. And when he had catechized his family and his servants, he came to this very poor-looking and orderly-dressed man.
And he said to him, now, my friend, he said, I wonder if you could tell us how many commandments God has given us in his summary of the moral law and the obligation of man to God.
How many commandments are there? And the man looked at him and scratched his head a little and he said, sir, he said, there are 11 commandments. And Samuel Rutherford shook his head and he said, well, he said, I'm very sorry to see that you are ignorant of the scripture.
So ignorant that you see there are 10 commandments. And the household went to rest. It was Samuel Rutherford's habit to get up early in the morning and go out to a little copse, a wood, the back of his man's, on a Sunday morning before preaching.
[2:41] He did that and on that Sunday morning he found that there was someone there ahead of him. He heard a man praying. And when he made his way into the thicket, there was the tramp on his knees.

And Samuel Rutherford stood and listened and felt that he had seldom been led into the presence of God, apparently, as he was then.
He laid hold of the tramp and lifted him up and he said, I don't know who you are. He said, but I know now that you are a man of God. And he said, I would like you to take my pulpit this morning. And the man said, well, he said, I'll take your pulpit this morning if you take it yourself in the evening. I have come here to hear you preaching. The man went to the pulpit.
I suppose they dressed him up a bit more fitly for it. They were in Scotland. And he went and he conducted the opening exercises of the worship.
[3:48] And then when he gave out his text, it was these words. The words of the Lord Jesus to his disciples. A new commandment. Give I unto you that ye love one another.

And the visiting beggar turned out, in fact, to be Archbishop Usher. Or Bishop Usher. I think he was an Archbishop. So there was one good Archbishop. The primacy of love, I think, is something that we scarcely believe.
And it is certainly something that we hardly put into practice. That's why I make no excuse for bringing it to attention in this opening meeting.
The new commandment of Christ lies upon every born-again believer. Lies upon everyone who professes his name. That ye love one another.

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And this very familiar chapter is, of course, the New Testament classical locus on the teaching of love. It's not the only locus by any means because the teaching of love is broad spread through Scripture.
[5:05] But here we have it under God, through the Apostle, in concentrated form. And I would expect that most Christians turn to this chapter very frequently.

And the chapter, without any blush of shame, exalts love. And it gives Christian love a very high place. It sets it above all other graces given by God in regeneration.
It sets Christian love above not only graces but gifts. It sets it above hope and it sets it even above faith.
I want us to think first of all about the context in which we find this chapter.
Just in my way of introduction. It is, I think, highly significant that we should be found in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthian church. To scan that letter tells us that if there was one thing lacking in Corinth, it was the spirit of Christian love.
[6:29] There was there a failure to obey the commandment of Christ. I hear, says the Apostle, as he opens the letter, that there is strife among you.

Yes, some were saying, I am of Paul. And I am of Apollos. And I am of Cephas. And sadly, that pattern has been repeated down through the history.
And that pattern is stamped over evangelical Christianity in our land today. And then there was not only strife, there was immorality amongst them.
Such things as were not even spoken of among the heathen. Strange church this. But Paul still calls it a church. He writes to the saints of God who are at Corinth.
There was not only immorality, there was drunkenness. In the strangest place of all. At the Lord's table. And quite clearly, there was not just the use, but the abuse of spirit-given gifts in the church in Corinth.
[7:46] That's the pattern, that's the scene into which Paul is writing. And the whole letter is a corrective. Very many men, when they preach from some of the texts in this letter, I'm afraid, fail to put the text into that broad context and setting.

This letter is a corrective to a church in which there were so many things wrong. But we should thank God for the word that corrects and chastises our disobedience.
And we thank God for this letter. And then, it is immediately, this immediate context is in the abuse of spirit-given gifts.
And really, one would want to start back in the last verse of the previous chapter in an exegesis of it. I show unto you a more excellent way.
And again, all too often, what is written in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 is written with a failure in one way or another to take these words into consideration.
[9:00] I show unto you a more excellent way. And the more excellent way is this, love. And the emphasis is not just in love.

It is on the total, absolute supremacy of love. When a Christian believer is giving obedience to the commandment of Christ to love one another, he is never more like God than he is then.
In family reading last evening, we were reading in 1 John chapter 4. And I was struck afresh by the emphasis of the Apostle John.
On this truth, and it's a truth that again, evangelical religion has all too often neglected and forgotten. God is love. Love is the sphere within which every gift of the Holy Ghost and every grace of regeneration is to be used and exercised.
And any gift that is not exercised within the context and the sphere of downright caring Christian love is being prostituted.
[10:28] And as a preacher of the Gospel, I feel, and I hope that you also feel, that that is our solemn thought. Whether it's the exercise of the gift of prophecy or preaching, it must be exercised in love.

And Barry McChain was away from his congregation in Dundee on one occasion. And one of his close friends was preaching there.
And he wrote afterwards to McChain and told him that he had preached a sermon on the doctrine of eternal punishment. McChain wrote back to him and said, I hope you preached it in love.
Love is the hallmark of the Spirit's work. The gift of tongues or speaking in tongues is not the hallmark of the Spirit's work.

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Love is the hallmark of the Holy Spirit's work. Love is the hallmark of the Holy Spirit's work. Love is the hallmark of the Holy Spirit's work. And there is no other gift, no one gift of the Holy Spirit, that testifies to the regenerating work of the Spirit as this grace does.
[11:48] I remember once being told by a young man who had come from England to Aberdeen when I was ministering there my first child. But he had been converted in our service the previous Sunday evening.

And I thought, oh, thank you, Lord. So I said, what was it in the sermon now that really caught you? Well, he said, actually, it wasn't the sermon at all. It was the way the man at the door shook hands with me and said, welcome, boy.
That really moved me. Let's take especially verses four to seven in this chapter and let them be a comment or a commentary on the words of our text.
And as we come down to them, let's just quickly look at how verses four to five are introduced to us. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, love is more important than tongues.
Now, I'm not going into the question of whether tongues are still with the church of God. But if they are, and I'll put two lines under the if, if they are, then they are not the most important thing in the church today.
[13:05] No matter what some people may say and write. Scripture says, though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am nothing.

Love is more important than tongues. I wonder if the charismatic movement believes that. Love is more important than maturity. I wonder if the reformed constituency in Britain believes that. Though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mystery and all knowledge. And probably most of us here put a premium on biblical knowledge.
And we do rightly. Our reforming forefathers did that. And they moved men for God. And we can never know the word of God too well.
that no matter how well we know the scriptures, no matter how well we know our doctrines, if we have all knowledge and have no love.
[14:27] And though we have all faith, faith, more important than tongues, more important than maturity, more important than knowledge, more important even than preaching.

The gift of prophecy, more important than faith. Faith that could move mountains. If we have all these things and we are void of love, what are we?
We're our own door. We are nothing before the throne of God. These things may make us something in the eyes of men. But before the throne of the one who is high and lifted up, we are nothing.
And I want us to go on now to to look. I leave you to look at the rest of the things yourself. Giving away all your goods to feed the poor. I don't know one single passion who has stripped himself of even all his luxuries in order to further the gospel of Christ.
Do you? And do I give my body to be burned? Last week I was lecturing on Patrick Hamilton. It took six hours for him to burn. He wasn't burned, he was roasted.
[15:45] But I don't know anybody who has given their bodies to be burned. Do you? And if they did, that person stripped himself of everything he had.

And if he gave his body to be burned. And if he did these things without love, then it profited him nothing. There was no plus for him before the throne of God.
Now, I want to come on to look at the way love operates supremely in three spheres.
And first of all, we're introduced to that thought, I think, by a statement, first negative and then positive, that speaks on the general nature or character of Christian love.
That is important. What sort of thing are we talking about when we talk about the love of Christ which is shed abroad in the heart of the believer? Are we talking about just a warm feeling that makes you feel nice and mushy and perhaps a little gushy?
[17:06] No. We're not talking about something soft and malleable and warm. We are in fact not talking about feeling at all in the first instance.

I'm afraid that the ideas that came out from Hollywood through the 30s and the 40s have infiltrated not only the thought of the love that there should be between man and woman but the kind of love that should reign in the heart of the Christian believer.
What sort of thing is love? And Paul says two things about them. The first negative, the second positive. Love suffers long.

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Love is patient. And we'll see as we go on that in fact Paul is talking about something that is very tough and that is very tenacious.
I don't have too much time for some of the sermons of the late Martin Luther King but I have never forgotten something that he said in one of the sermons of his that I read he said our God has a tough mind and a tender heart and brethren that is true God is not mocked and the kind of love with which God has loved does not evade sin it pays it pays the price for sin and because God loves his people and because he loves you and he loves me he will be tough with us and he'll break us again and again and again and humble us until we are obedient to him and it will never be in anger that he chastises us but in love if he are without chastisement then are ye bastards and not sons don't think it a strange thing how patient
[19:20] God has been with you my brother how patient through your Christian life through your years of ministry I'm saying you because he's been the same with me and perhaps as I get older the thing that amazes me most of all about God's dealings with me is the unfailing patience that he exercises towards me he is long suffering and slow to laugh and plenteous in mercy love is patient how patient are we without people how patient are we without our brothers and sisters in Christ if patience the patience of love Christian love was being exercised and had been exercised down to the history of the church that history will be very different that's negative love is patient it doesn't lose the rag and flare up and right off it's patient it goes on loving and loving and loving and loving partner in God himself and then love says the apostle in a positive way love is kind origin and I wouldn't trust origin in all that much neither but origin commenting in this passage said this just means that love is sweet nice to live with how sweet are we how nice to live with

I'm talking about love not holiness I once heard the man define a holy person as someone who was nice to know well I know a lot of unholy people who are quite nice to know but a Christian lives in such a way that it's a pleasure to meet him you feel your heart warm and there is a response in your heart to the love that you feel in him love is kind kindness may seem very simple may not seem very theological may not seem very godly but my brethren will live in a world that's short on kindness and I feel ashamed to have to say it that perhaps the greatest kindness I have known has not come from within the circle of my Christian brethren but from out with it and if we are kind we are like
God in his dealings with his children you know one of my favorite words the loving kindness of God it's the only way it can be expressed it's not just love it's love expressed in kindness in God going out in front and preparing thoughtfully and purposefully and graciously for my need and showing his kindness to that need and his love for me long before I ever know about the need same with you and then after this sort of general picture just give two words we get Paul going into what I've mentioned as three specific areas of the Christian life and he first of all touches on the most important or one of the most important areas of all how I live with myself as a
Christian love within the sphere of my personal life I have to live with me the grammar may not be all that good but it's true for every one of us and the love of God can operate there right in the depths of personality and we thank God for that and the first thing Paul says he says five things and really they are five negatives and they warn us about five dangers in the Christian's own life and the first thing he says is this love is not jealous love envious not is that true for you is it true for me one of the most shattering things I think that that happened to me when I was still quite a young Christian was to find that one minister of the gospel could be jealous of another minister of the gospel and the longer one has been in the ministry the more one has seen of
Christianity through our land today the more one realises that often what lies behind cliques and fellowships is nothing but party spirit and the envy one of another within the body of Christ and you see if we only listen to the word of God what have we any one of us that we have not received and received from God I must say I suppose it was a hard lesson for me to learn I must say that when I see gifts burning for Christ high mighty gifts that my heart might envy when I see them consecrated in the service of Christ I today can say thank you Lord thank you that you've given us a man a brother like that love envy is not and so often envy jealousy is what tears fellowships congregations families apart it will work in the
[25:48] Christian heart it will work in the Christian church and it's a devastating thing there is a word in God's word a word in scripture that says jealousy is cruel as the grave and I find it is it brings death with it allow yourself to be jealous of one brother in Christ and you will lose something yourself self destructive then the second thing that he does mention is this he says love wanteth not

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itself love is not boastful no room for boasting in the Christian life again what have we that we have not received the very faith that we exercise and through which we lay hold of Christ that very faith is scarcely our own for it is the gift of God no flesh shall glory in God's presence and for a Christian to be boastful and proud is a contradiction of what a Christian is pride it would seem has something to do with the greatest mystery of theology the origin of evil in a universe created by a good and holy

God one wanted to exalt himself into the place of God and that's the very essence of what pride is boastful love this is the third thing love is not puffed up it's not inflated it doesn't cherish inflated ideas of its own importance it's realistic and it keeps the ego down I think it was Napoleon who said I am unique among men I am not as other men I don't even need this end to obey the same moral code as other men he boasted he gloried and what he thought was his uniqueness the root word underlying the
Greek here is disgraceful something shameful something indecent it is behavior which is graceless and it's interesting that the Greek word for grace is also the Greek word for charm grace should be attractive grace should shine with beauty God is beautiful he lives in the beauty of holiness and so should every child of God and is the room to be boastful when we look at ourselves in the light of God's throne we know ourselves to be nothing apart from him and apart from his grace there's no room for pride in the
Christian life it's a contradiction and then it's a contradiction and then love love seeketh not her own the fifth thing here love is not always insisting on its own way and having its own way how many Christians I know who are always doing just that I bet they are very careful what I'm saying I suppose the thing has been recorded I was a minister in two congregations and I had a Kirk session of seven elders in the first one and I had eleven in the second one and I often wished that these men would read this particular phrase love seeketh not its own I discovered that Christian elders can want their own way I discovered something through them that I wanted my own way it's in us all selfishness love is not selfish
I can remember being terribly bothered and troubled with one person in one congregation I was in she's no longer alive it took me a long time to realize that her selfishness was in fact one of the glaring signs of her own insecurity let's remember that if we're secure in the love of Christ we don't need to be selfish we can take what love gives and then he goes on to love overcoming problems in relationships with others and we'll go through this very quickly love is not easily provoked love is not irritable it's lovely to be a Christian you're never irritable with your wife not even at 7 o'clock in the morning no you're not irritable with your kids not even when they're pulling the box off your best books no you're never irritable with the people that are sitting in front of you because they're looking out the window when you're preaching the gospel or doing something else that they shouldn't be doing you don't get all head up and begin to preach in a bad temper you're not irritable love's at work love thinketh no evil love doesn't keep an account doesn't make wee lists in the mind the Greek word underlying this again is a word to cast up accounts and how often
[31:57] Christians do that oh I'll remember that do you know what I know about him if you knew what I knew about him you would never listen to him again love thinks no evil doesn't keep a list no record of wrongs lists of false and then the next thing is love rejoices not in iniquity doesn't crow over the brother who stumbles and falls doesn't want to rush down the road and tell about the sin of the neighbor doesn't gossip doesn't rejoice in evil and how often I have been in company with Christian people and it was only afterwards I realised that perhaps we were in danger of rejoicing in iniquity love doesn't rejoice in the fall of our brother it grieves and it prays and it tries to bring healing and restoration love rejoices not in iniquity fourthly but in the truth it delights in the spread of the truth as we offered translates this it rejoices every time it sees someone converted it's thrilled and glad when the gospel makes progress and then the third realm is this love overcoming problems in our relationship with God himself perhaps that's the basic one of all love says the apostle bears all things we're in verse 7 now love puts up with everything that God sends

God's ways with us are mysterious I this afternoon came from the funeral of our very close friend he was a colleague in the college he taught Old Testament and Hebrew last March he had an operation and after the operation he knew what was wrong he had to resign from his chair in the college he lived four doors away from my home and I was able to visit James Fraser very frequently you know this on the day he told me almost a year ago just now that he was to have investigation and an operation and that two of his brothers had died of cancer and he was afraid of that from that day until he died on Tuesday morning I never heard one murmur of complaint about God's dealing

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with him not one he says he does all things well was what he said to me on one of the last occasions
I visited him when he was just a skeleton but his love to God was shining out he does all things well love beareth all things does it with you and with me how we complain and murmur and say why has the Lord done this and why has he sent that love believes all things now that doesn't mean that love is gullible but it believes everything that God says and perhaps it means this also that it trusts every profession until that profession is counteracted it's ready to trust Christian the Christian brother it's ready to believe the best of them love hopes all things there's a strong confidence in Christian love nothing is able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus and Christian love knows that love endures all things it puts up with everything again that God is pleased to send that is how
Christian love works it's not a soft mushy thing it's a very tough tenacious thing my friend there's only one way we can have it and hold it and that is by living in the light of the cross counting yourselves dead to sin unto self in Christ love love is the greatest there remain of these three faith hope love but the greatest of these is love I've only been able to sketch out why Paul says that I would ask you to think about it pray about it and ask God to give it to you in greater measure than you've ever had it before what a prayer our gracious God we have to humble ourselves before thee and confess among all the other dark and sinful things in our lives we have to confess how little we know of real
Christian love how little we know of its nature and its operation in our own hearts and we pray thee that for Jesus' sake thou wouldst give us more of it seal thy word upon our hearts oh Lord grant that this conference and our gathering together would make the flame of love burn up in our hearts that we might lovingly love one another in a more realistic and practical way and may we rejoice in the bonds of love that cannot be severed here as we pray thee because we ask in Jesus name Amen

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