

Character and conduct of love

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[0 : 0 0] Now seeking God's help, let's turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 13, and we read verses 4 to 7. Love suffereth long and is kind, love envieth not, love wanteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

This is our sublime section of scripture in every sense. No matter how often we read it, reflect on it, or even try to preach from it, we find ourselves failing to really grasp much of what Paul is saying to us.

The letter is written to a church which, in many ways, is like the Christian church of our own times. More of an emphasis, perhaps, in some quarters on gifts than on grace.

There's a great deal of pseudo-spirituality about. Paul is convinced that the great antidote to all these problems is that men and women be full and overflowing with the love of God.

That men and women reflect the love of God in their own daily lives. And surely there is nothing more vital for our Christian profession to be a credible one than that we, as we live out our lives in the world, reproduce and reflect the love of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

[2 : 0 8] That love which will seek the highest good of our fellow men and women, irrespective of what it might cost ourselves.

That love which always has the glory of God as the great goal and aim. That love which is in Christ ought to be in Christ's people as well.

And the Christian church of Paul's day, and of our own day, needs to be reminded of that fact. Paul is saying that we may have all the gifts, but love is the more excellent way.

And our gifts must be exercised in love, for God to be glorified, and for good to come to ourselves and to others.

And Paul begins this 13th chapter with a word of warning. He cautions the Christians in Corinth, and perhaps he's cautioning us as well, that we may speak the right words, we may see wonders, we may do great works, we may be very religious, but if we don't have the love of God, if these things don't come as a result of our being in our relationship with Christ, then our words and our wonders and our works will all be in vain.

[3 : 5 6] A word of caution, which the Christian church needs to hear in every age. And then Paul goes on to speak in the verses that we'll look at tonight, of the character and conduct of love, before finally stressing that love continues when all other gifts will fail, that love is greater than all the gifts and all the graces.

Love is of God. God is love. What then, without spinning out the introduction any further, what then are the characteristics of true Christian love, as Paul spells them out for us here?

Well, I think that he mentions two, and we have them brought before us at the beginning of verse 4. The first thing Paul says is this, love suffers long.

Our love is patient. When people offend us, love will not be rash in responding to offence.

When Christian love is in exercise, we will exercise restraint. We won't be out for revenge. We won't want to assert our own rights.

[5 : 27] We won't even resent any wrong that may have been done to us. By exercising patience, love promotes peace and unity and harmony within the Christian fellowship.

And that's surely something that the Christian church needs. in every denomination and in every congregation.

And as you as a congregation examine yourselves, in view of the forthcoming settlement, surely you should ask yourselves, am I promoting this kind of spirit within this fellowship?

Am I the kind of person who on account of my love for God and my love for my brother and sister in Christ and my love for the lost and promoting patience, am I long-suffering?

We know that long-suffering is in the very nature of God himself. He is long-suffering towards us. The scriptures state so again and again.

[6 : 46] And all who know God will testify to the fact that God has been and continues to be long-suffering or patient towards us.

Love which is long-suffering will endure evil and injury to itself and will wait for reformation and will work towards reformation.

Aware that everything at last is in the hands of God whose will is perfect. But love when it's patient won't be overcome by all the problems that confront it.

Won't give up easily. No matter how we're treated we never stop loving even when we're hurt especially when we're hurt.

And I think that Paul himself is someone who practices what he preaches. Paul is hurt at the carry-on in Corinth. Paul knows that there is immorality.

[7 : 57] Paul knows that there is drunkenness at the Lord's supper. And yet Paul doesn't write them off. Paul addresses them as a Christian church.

Paul recognises them as the Lord's people. Yes Paul tells them that they are to have no fellowship with those who are living in open sin.

And yet Paul wants reformation within the church. Paul wants love to do its own work. love to be patient.

And that is God's will for every Christian congregation. For our love to go into action. For our love to be patient and long-suffering. But Paul says more than that.

Still speaking of the characteristics of love. Not only is love patient, but Paul says love is kind. It's not just that love endures, but love by nature is inclined to do good.

[9 : 06] The scripture tells us that if we're Christians, we're to be kindly affectioned to one another with brotherly love. We are to add to our godliness brotherly kindness.

We are not only to seize opportunities to be kind, but we are even to go searching for them. We are to be on the lookout for every opportunity to display our love in this manner.

I'm told by the scholars that the idea behind the word is this. Love is thoughtful or love goes out in front so as to pave the way for others and make things easier for them.

What Paul is really saying is this. Love will put self out in order to be helpful towards others. This is the characteristic of the love of Christ and this is to be true of the love of the Christian.

What about us tonight? How characteristic is this of your love and of mind and of our love as a Christian denomination and congregation?

[10 : 30] Jesus didn't spin the yarn of the Good Samaritan for nothing. Jesus wanted his audience to know that this was the way to show God's love by loving one's neighbour as oneself.

we'll come back to that maybe further on. But this evening if we claim to have the Lord in our lives and if we're saying that his love has been shed abroad in our hearts then we ought to ask God to help us take every opportunity that comes our way to be kind in the way we deal with others.

Let me be a little kinder let me be a little blinder to the faults of those about me let me praise a little more let me be when I am weary just a little bit more cheery let me serve a little better those that I am striving for let me be a little braver when temptation puts me waver let me strive a little harder to be all that I should be let me be a little meeker with the brother that is weaker let me think more of my neighbour and a little less of me I don't know who penned those words but he or possibly she was trying to speak on this characteristic of Christian love love is patient love is kind how then does this love conduct itself well

Paul tells us the answer to that question in relation to ourselves and to others and to the outworking of God's providence and the first thing he says is this love does not envy love is not jealous love will not hold a grudge perhaps in the context Paul is speaking of those who were to the fore in church life in Corinth those who were gifted and those who obviously had talents that others lacked well Paul may very well be saying to those who don't have these gifts and talents don't envy those who have them don't be jealous don't be bitter don't grudge jealousy we're told is destructive jealousy we know is at the root of all the problems that arise in

Christendom from time to time they were at the root of the problems in Corinth self assertion looking after number one and so on well Paul is saying love is not jealous when others get on how do you feel when the talents of others may be employed and you don't have these talents are you jealous are you envious or do you praise God that he's given ten talents to some and five to others and is your desire before God to use the one talent that he has given you for the furtherance of his own glory and a time of vacancy and a time when you're looking forward to a new ministry instead of grudging and envying the gifts that others may have under

[14 : 23] God you see to it that you use whatever little gift he's given you to promote the interests of Christ in this congregation and beyond God has made you you and God has made me me and God wants to use us as we are for his own glory sake at the induction of a certain minister once the following advice was given don't spend your life longing to be someone else cultivate your own personality and always remember when God made you he only made one of you and then he broke the mold men and women consider the gifts of others and become envious because we might not have these gifts love love does not envy love is not jealous love will ask

God to help us use what we have for his own name sake and why is that because we're told next that love does not want itself when love is in operation we won't be over anxious to impress men and women we won't want to promote our own interests at the expense of others we won't boast of our own achievements we will not be desirous of vainglory love Paul is saying does not show off does not perform before men to be applauded by men love will not be guilty of exhibitionism love will not want to promote self love will want to exalt Christ love will want to hold

Christ up and to disappear from view in the interests of Christ and of his kingdom that doesn't mean that love will ensure that we do nothing for God not at all but that we do it in humility with a desire that he might be exalted whosoever says Jesus exalts himself shall be abased and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted love love is not puffed up Paul tells us puffed up in the sense of being self satisfied and smug with one's own achievements and wanting to be little what others may be doing love knows that in and of ourselves we have nothing to be proud of nothing to boast in did

Paul not say God forbid that strong language God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by whom says Paul I am crucified unto the world and the world unto me you the attitude of love is this that of the centurion Lord I am not worthy that you should come under my rope love will see to it that in lowliness of mind each will esteem other better than self the Corinthians were prone to be conceited I am of Paul I am of Apollos I am of Cephas and so on even those who are saying I am of Christ were guilty of having no time for those who are acknowledging the hand of others in their conversion and

Paul cuts right across that we are the people here is what is this attitude and reminds them and reminds us that love wanteth not itself but love is not puffed up that love as Paul says does not behave itself unseemly for us to be proud and self assertive is unseemly it's inconsistent with Christ and all that he represents and yet we're so proud at a personal level and us collective groups of believers so proud to the sin so proud to pride and

[19 : 51] Paul is saying that must not be love will not behave in an unbecoming manner is what he's really telling us the NIV says love is not rude I think what Paul is really saying is this love will want to conduct itself in a way that is completely consistent with God's revealed will and way yes it involves us in being courteous and well mannered and polite but it will also ensure that as believers we will want to abstain from every appearance of evil and not be involved in anything that is indecent and improper and perhaps the real thrust of Paul's words here refers to Christian worship and to the fact that within the congregation at

Corinth there were things that were unseemly and God is addressing himself to us tonight and he's saying to us to jettison everything that is unseemly from our Christian lives it might hurt us to do so the cutting off of the arm is a painful experience the plugging out of the eye is perhaps even more so but anything and everything that is unseemly must go from our individual Christian lives and from our congregational Christian life love he says will not seek her own love will always put the interests of others first love will act as the good

Samaritan acted and will cross the road and will tenderly care for those who are in need in that parable the religious walked by on the other side in all probability on the way to a meeting the good Samaritan went across and he went the second mile in every way to look after his neighbour who was in need and he put his interests before his own and that's what Jesus is telling us here is characteristic of his love in his people we'll want to lay aside self for the sake of others and above all for the sake of God and of his kingdom but what about those who bother us and those who annoy us and those who get under our skin and those who are there's always some of them about within the

Christian church and in saying that let's remember that we ourselves may be getting under the skins of others but what about them well he tells us love is not easily provoked of course there's such a thing as righteous anger there is anger that is justified we must be intolerant of sin but what Paul is saying here really is this when our inconsistencies are exposed and they're never more exposed than when we sit under God's word when our inconsistencies are exposed if love is really operating we won't take umbrage we won't go into the hub Paul is really saying love is not touchy love will not be hypersensitive Paul is saying that love will react in a totally different way both to those who expose us for what we are and to those who may have no time for us than the worldly man would respond to that kind of individual the man of the world when exposed for what he is tries to hide evade the issue get away from the facts the man of the world when cold shouldered by others will cold shoulder in return but here

Paul is saying that must not be the way with you to those who show you up respond in love and thank God that he's used them to reveal your inconsistencies to you and what about those who wouldn't even accept your friendship let alone your fellowship the natural reaction is to resent love's reaction is to seek reconciliation the natural reaction is to harbor enmity and grudge and adopt just wait until I get my own back the kind of response but the scripture tells the Christian that love must be sincere that God will see to it that justice is done

[26 : 09] God tells us so clearly in his word and we have it again in Romans 12 that we must not be out for revenge that we must not want to get our own back that we must not respond in the same way as others may be dealing with us they say that's impossible of course it's impossible but for God's love it's God's love operating in our hearts that can make these things a reality we can see to it that we're not easily provoked we're so touchy so often we should ask the Lord to remove that promise yes we should be sensitive to sin we're to have no plug with sin in our own life or in the life of another but not for a moment are we to react in a manner that is unbecoming even towards those who may be dealing in an unloving way with us love he says thinketh no evil

I think the great there is love does not reckon the evil love keeps no record of wrongs that doesn't mean that we turn a blind eye to evil but it does mean that when possible we will not attribute evil motives to others and it certainly means this that we won't keep our record ready to take out at the appropriate moment of the sins and faults of other people focusing on what may be wrong with others will in no way heal the situation you've got a sore finger thinking about it all day won't make the pain go away it'll only probably make it worse because you're so caught up with thinking of your sore finger and it's the same when we focus on evil we don't get rid of it we only succeed in making it worse than it's been the scripture says the man and the woman who has love he that covers transgression sees love love covers a multitude of sins love will not keep a record of evil love will take no delight in focusing on what's wrong with other people what does

Jesus say he uses an almost absurd illustration to get his point across why do you consider the wee speck of dust in your brother's eye and don't consider the big plank that's sticking out your own Jesus is saying that if we're to be like him then we will not be guilty of focusing on others and on what's wrong with them there's enough evil for us to cope with in our own lives and to go to Christ with that he might cover our sins and then he says this and I'm listening to the surface of it I know but it's important for us to take it as a unit love he says rejoiceth not in iniquity love won't gloat over and take delight in anything that is inconsistent with the character of God because

God himself takes no delight in evil iniquity gives God no pleasure yet sometimes God's people might give the impression that we are taking delight in sin and especially in the sins of others love will want to protect will want to shield will want to repair will want to restore we bring everything to God always remembering our own vulnerability our own weakness he that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall and so scripture is telling us Paul is telling us that all these things are characteristic of love but there's more than that he says this love he says rejoices in the truth

I think perhaps slightly better rejoices with the truth what's he saying maybe we've been speaking negatively long enough well we haven't really because Paul has been speaking in such terms up to now but Paul is saying here that love will enthusiastically and energetically cooperate with anything and everything that is good and righteous and in harmony with God's revealed mind and will love will in every way cooperate with that which is like God with that which is true to the character of God love will cooperate wholeheartedly and delight itself in the truth and in the truth alone because this is the love of Christ we're talking about and he himself is the truth and that being the case love will rejoice when truth and righteousness is to be seen in other people when Christ likeness is seen in others love will be over the moon with that love will be thrilled to the very soul in seeing

[32 : 43] God like qualities in others as well as hoping to see glimpses of such God like qualities in oneself love rejoices in the truth with the truth with everything that is God like and Christ like love beareth all things believeth all things hopeth all things endureth all things love beareth all things that again refers to endurance and to fortitude love will encounter difficulties as it expresses itself it doesn't mean that we're to be doormats that we're to be softies as Christians but it does mean that as Christians we ought to seek for a good dose of spiritual discernment and when offense is caused what does Jesus tell us that we should forgive even when the same brother offends us seventy times seven and does that mean that once the four hundred and nineties offense has been committed it we're then free to exact revenge well anyone who knows the way

Jesus used language will know that that's not what he means what Jesus is saying is this that really this love which bears all things and which is prepared to forgive those who offend us knows no limits any more than his own love towards us in bearing with us and forgiving us knows no limits love believes all things that means that as Christians we'll be charitable we'll put the best construction possible on things without being gullible and swallowing everything we're told again the discernment comes in here but I think it means this too love believes that in all things God is working together for our good love believes that God has a purpose for us and love believes that God's purposes are being brought to pass and that being the case love hopes love has confidence love looks forward to the fulfillment in our

Christian experience of all that God has promised to do love looks beyond what is sin and temporal towards the unseen and eternal love will be like the love of Jesus who endured the cross despising the shame for the joy that was set before him and love will believe that God is able to turn the tide and change men and change circumstances love they may mean it for evil but God means all things for good and that being so no wonder he says love endureth all things love will persevere this love of God operating in our lives is powerful and persistent overcoming all problems in the face of persecution love persevere really Paul is here using a military metaphor and he's saying to us that as good soldiers of Jesus

Christ we will endure hardship and we will reflect him in the way we live now maybe you're saying well there wasn't much of Christ in that I would humbly submit that it was all Christ because these things that God is looking for in us are to be found in our Lord Jesus and if he's our saviour if we've received him as our Lord then he has given us an example that we should follow in his steps until we know Christ as saviour and Lord no matter how much we try to live up to what scripture sets before us we come woefully short we find ourselves utterly inadequate in every way but when we receive

Christ as our saviour and Lord he then gives us grace to live as he wants us to live oh you say these things aren't really important these things are secondary these things are ah well after all these things are just the practical things the things that really matter are the spiritual well of course the things that really matter are the spiritual but spiritual things express themselves in practical ways and Jesus in order to emphasise and with this I finish the supreme importance of Christian love especially in the lives of all who claim to be his says this a new commandment give I unto you that you love one another as I have loved you that you also love one another by this shall all men know not so much by what you say by the wonders you perform by the works that you may do but by this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one toward another we're to love the

[39 : 26] Lord we're to love one another and we're to love our enemies as well that we may be children of our Father who is in heaven and that we may be perfect as our Father who is in heaven is perfect that's the character and conduct of Christian love some doubt I know far too hurriedly tonight as Paul brings them before us in this chapter love also continues love is greater than all other things but that's a sermon in itself may God help you may God help me to know him as our saviour and our Lord and to reflect his likeness and reveal his love as we seek by his grace to live for him in the world may it be true of us as individuals may it be true of you as a congregation may it be true of all our congregations and may it be true of the whole

Christian church that the world is convinced that we are Christians because the love of Christ which we claim to be in our hearts is in evidence in our lives may God grant it so for all of us for Jesus sake let's pray oh lord in the light of that teaching we confess that sometimes we wonder if we know anything of that love at all but we give thanks oh god that even if the seedbed of that love is to be found in our hearts that it's there planted by the holy spirit and we ask for grace to cultivate the seed that it might grow and produce a harvest of righteousness in our lives the fruit of the spirit is love joy peace long suffering gentleness goodness faith meekness temperance against such there is no law may that fruit be found in all of us who claim to have faith in Jesus for whose glory sake amen