



## The supreme grace of Christian love

No passage of the Bible is more familiar than 1 Corinthians 13. It is a masterpiece of religious prose, justly celebrated by believer and unbeliever alike as a model of fine expression. The theme of the chapter is Christian love, its characteristics, superiority and permanence. Where in all the realm of literature could one find such profound thought so elegantly expressed? Its beguiling simplicity bears the hallmark of genius and of inspiration.

It must come, therefore, as something of a shock to discover that this often-recited chapter announces a religious principle which condemns almost the whole world: *'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity (love), I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal'...* (v. 1). The passage proceeds to enumerate various impressive religious attainments: ecstatic use of the tongue, knowledge of deep mysteries, faith which moves mountains, self-sacrificing charity to the poor and the excruciating pains of martyrdom (v. 1-2). It is an awe-inspiring list of soaring qualities which many would only associate with the very great and the very good. The majority of professing Christians lay no claim to these impressive achievements. But the Apostle, be it said, only brings in this catalogue of excellencies in order to tell us that of themselves they are of no value! This he does with so arresting a figure of speech that it has become proverbial: *'I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal'* (v. 1). We may possess all of these spectacular gifts and yet be worthless.

In these familiar words we possess one of the most central principles of the Christian faith. It is this. No religious act is of any value in God's sight if it does not accompany and flow from Christian love.

The Apostle's meaning can only be that the quality of religious actions is derived principally from the  *motive*  by which they are done. This is a truth which all but Utilitarian philosophers pay lip-service to. But men seldom ponder it seriously. If the implications of this one principle were consistently thought through, they would have a momentous effect upon us all.

At the very heart of the principle here enunciated by Paul must lie the necessity for the New Birth. Invisible as this doctrine is at first sight, it becomes clear after a little reflection that Paul is virtually saying what our Lord himself declares to Nicodemus: *'Ye must be born again'* (John 3:7). No religious service is of value in God's sight if it does not spring from love. *'The flesh profiteth nothing'* (John 6:63). But love is a fruit of regeneration. Where there is no regeneration, there may be the sensational and the spectacular. But the spectacular is not that which God takes pleasure in. Before any activity of man can become acceptable to God, it must be performed out of a motive of love. Such a motive cannot exist before the New Birth has taken place. The conclusion is inescapable. What is done in God's Name before regeneration is spiritually valueless.

To state matters in this way clears our spiritual vision by showing us how empty is the vaunted service of unconverted church persons. It also humbles us, because it reminds us that we are incapable in this life of evaluating any man's service for God perfectly. Many who have been famous as religious figures in history will turn out on the Last Day to have built only with *'wood, hay and stubble'* (1 Corinthians 3:12). Others, whom we scarcely noticed on earth, will be above us in glory because they excelled us in this *'one thing needful'* of love to God.

There is something in us all which is ready to overpraise the spectacular. But the quality of men's actions, Paul reminds us, is to be measured at last not by what men see, but by what  *God*  sees in them of love to himself. To remember that, is to recall our Lord's saying, *'Many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first'* (Matthew 19:30). Humble service, done with much love, will

receive Christ's 'Well done'. It is more precious to God than all the spectacular 'miracles' of unregenerate 'saints'.

The theological importance of Paul's words can hardly be repeated too often. All unregenerate service done for God is worthless. God has no more delight in the devout actions of graceless men than in the chiming of bells or the lighting of candles. Religious actions, though correct perhaps in their outward form, are offensive to him if they do not spring from a heart renewed by his Spirit. On the other hand, menial and everyday tasks are sanctified when God's love is in men's hearts. This is a doctrine which marks a watershed between Catholicism and true Protestantism.

There can be no doubt that the 'love' which Paul refers to here in 1 Corinthians 13 is the renewed affection of a converted man. The Greek term *agape* does not refer to mere benevolence or humanitarian charity. It is the term distinctly used in the New Testament to refer to the sanctified affection of a redeemed sinner. Regenerate prayer or regenerate devotion may lack the external adornment of High Church ritual. But it comes up as a sweet savour unto God, who has an eye to the secret desire of the worshipper. Such acts of devotion can never be '*dead works*' (Hebrew 9:14) to him.

There is salutary correction for the regenerate man, too, in this passage of Paul. It reminds us of the need to put our heart into all that we do for God. It may seem surprising that a good man should need to be reminded of this. But experience shows that it is so. Since nothing is of value in God's eye if it does not flow from love, then how much need there is for us all to correct our habitual formalism!

The problem of formalism, nominalism or religious 'coldness' is intensely serious, for the obvious reason that it springs from absence of love to God. This is nothing short of a spiritual crime. God takes special notice of the way and manner in which men think of him as they attend to his service and worship. The third commandment has particular reference to the *spirit* in which we are to act when we do anything in his Name. What we do in a spirit of 'deadness' when we pretend to wait on God is a taking of his Name in vain. The unregenerate are always guilty of this sin; and the regenerate sometimes are. No rebuke enters more into the heart of a good man than that of Christ: '*Thou hast left thy first love*' (Revelation 2:4). And those words were addressed to active and orthodox believers.

The reason why there is so little brotherly love among religious people is that there is so little real love of God in us. The former is the visible index of the latter. It ought to be one of our main reasons for wishing to live another day upon earth, that we have a duty to grow in love. Love, in its essence, is likeness to God. It is the contradiction of sin. A man has developed in holiness by that degree to which he has learnt to do all things on a principle of love. The best believers find their progress slow and their attainments meagre. They are constrained to bewail the inward conflict of their hearts. Our stupid opposition to holiness betrays to us that our souls have a secret unwillingness to become like God. Even years after conversion has taken place, our souls are backward and slow. Perfect love is the ideal to which believers strive. But they are humbled and tantalised by its very elusiveness. Truly, we are a 'stiff-necked people'.

Though we know so little of love in this world, yet its fruits are so sweet, even in this present life, that we can appreciate how a world of unmixed and universal love must be a heaven indeed! It was our Saviour's emphatic and almost his last command on earth to them, that his people should excel in the grace of love. They must endeavour to do so here and now upon earth.

Love is the only sure balsam for a church's wounds. Where love reigns among believers, sin is virtually expelled. Where each strives to love his brother as himself, to esteem his brother in honour more than himself, to put his brother up and himself down, to speak generously or not at all, to conceal pardonable faults and to draw a veil over shortcomings, what room can there be for discontent or division? Where men are '*not puffed up, do not vaunt themselves, do not behave unseemly*' (v. 4, 5), what occasion for strife can possibly arise? Where brethren '*believe all things, hope all things, endure all things*' (v. 7), how can dissension find a foothold? On the other hand, where love is absent, there is no cure possible. A church must die.

Love is the jewel among the graces of the Christian life. We know it — and perpetually forget it. We see the very incarnation of God's love in the Gospel-portrait of Christ. We behold him as he first washes the disciples' feet and then mounts the cross to wash their souls. But hardly has the memory of this transcendent love faded from our thoughts than we find ourselves reverting to our old habits of self-seeking and self-interest. No marvel the prophet exclaimed, *'Woe is me!'* (Isaiah 6:5) and the apostle, *'O wretched man that I am!'* (Romans 7:24).

Why is real Christian love so scarce in the world? It is because its cultivation requires nothing less than the reversal of every instinct of our fallen natures. Love is against the grain of nature. It is against every fibre of our being as sinners. But nature, in the regenerate, is under the higher power of grace.

Then let every Christian take up the duty of Christian love with tenfold seriousness. Our life's work must be to call down heaven's help upon ourselves that we may bend towards the great command to love one another. What the unregenerate cannot do, true Christians may and must.

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

(1 Corinthians 13:13)

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