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"THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE"

– 1 COR. 13:1-13. – AUGUST 29. –

Golden Text: – "And now abideth faith, hope, charity (love) these three; but the greatest of these is charity" – love.
– 1 Cor. 13:13.

THE Church at Corinth had been founded for nearly five years and had enjoyed a wide range of experiences and Divine providences. St. Paul, in addressing them this epistle, was evidently considering well their needs and seeking to minister to the same the Divine message of grace and truth. The Apostle may not have realized how great a work he was doing and how far-reaching would be the scope of his instructions. Perhaps it was better for himself that he did not know how important was his service to the entire Church of the Gospel Age, as the mouthpiece of his Lord. Such a knowledge might have been too much for him and might have made him heady, the very condition of things the Lord was warding off by permitting him to still have the "thorn in [R4443 : page 229] the flesh," considered in our last lesson.

The Apostle had been discussing God's "gifts" to the early Church, which, to them, took the place of other blessings now enjoyed. They had no Bibles, as we have; no concordances or helps in Bible study. They needed the miraculous "gift of tongues" to draw them together once a week to consider the message of the Lord. They needed that the message should come in this miraculous way, in order that it might be the better appreciated by them and be of the Lord and not of themselves. Then, too, this made opportunity for another gift, "the interpretation of tongues." Thus by the various gifts they were drawn together and edified and built up, until such times as the books of the New Testament gradually accumulated and, after the death of the Apostles and the consequent cessation of the "gifts," these Divine providences of

the written Word were quite sufficient, yea, better everyway, as the Apostle sets forth in this lesson.

In this epistle St. Paul has been gradually leading the minds of his readers up to a higher appreciation of the blessings they enjoyed. In the chapter preceding our lesson he calls attention to these various facts and the oneness of the Church, and the Divine intent that each member should love and cooperate with the other. He pointed out to them that they were putting rather too high a value upon the "gift of tongues." That, while this "gift" had its proper place in the Church as a blessing, a still higher lesson lay in the ability to present Truth in a well-understood tongue or language. He declared himself able to speak with more tongues than any of them, and yet pointed out that he preferred to speak in the tongue which would be understood by his hearers. Finally in his argument he came to our present lesson and gave it as a climax to his hints preceding.

THE TONGUE OF LOVE SUPERIOR TO ALL

Boldly the Apostle sets forth a great Truth, which has come to be more and more recognized amongst Christian people everywhere, and that in proportion to their development in the character-likeness of their Redeemer, in proportion to their development as children of God. St. Paul sets forth that not knowledge, not wisdom, not talents, not "gifts" of any kind are the things most to be sought for, but Love – because God is Love, and because all who would be pleasing to God must develop this character, this disposition, and because, according to the Divine Law, none will ever have full Divine approval or eternal life on any other plane of being, without the full establishment in the heart, in the character, of this Divine quality – love. Therefore "Love is the fulfilling of the Law."

In St. Paul's forceful language, if he had all the tongues of earth and of heaven and could speak them with perfection and

charming rhythm, these would still not constitute a proof of his harmony with God and his acceptance to life eternal. Should he do all this in a perfunctory manner, even to the extent of speaking of the Divine character and in the interests and welfare of his fellows, he might still have no heart in the matter, but be merely like a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. The argument is that tongues, therefore, were not to be esteemed as a proof of Christian character.

Next he argues respecting prophecy, oratory and the understanding of mysteries and knowledge and the possession of mountain-moving faith, and he asks, Would these abilities not signify a glorious development and a full acceptance with God and an assurance of life eternal? He answers us, No, any of these or all of these abilities, precious as they are, in the Divine estimation would have no value whatever, would profit us nothing, unless mixed with love and based upon love. How his argument exalts this love quality before our minds! He proceeds to say that although all of our goods were given to feed the poor and though, as martyrs, our bodies should be burned at the stake, if the motive, the sentiment, behind the giving and behind the endurance of martyrdom were not love, there would be no reward – it would profit us nothing.

LOVE'S CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS

To those of the Lord's people who have never studied out what love is – what are its elements, its constituent parts, the Apostle's suggestions here will seem like a revelation. He enumerates nine ingredients: **[R4443 : page 230]**

- (1) Patience – "Love suffereth long;"
- (2) Kindness – "And is kind;"
- (3) Generosity – "Love envieth not;"
- (4) Humility – "Love vaunteth not itself; is not puffed up;"
- (5) Courtesy – "Doth not behave itself unseemly;"

- (6) Unselfishness – "Seeketh not her own;"
- (7) Good Temper – "Is not easily provoked;"
- (8) Guilelessness – "Thinketh no evil;"
- (9) Honesty – "Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the Truth."

What a wonderful world this would be even with all of its aches and pains physical, if every member of our race were perfect in these qualities enumerated! However, it would be a useless waste of time to weep over what we have not, or to unnecessarily chide our neighbors and friends because they, like ourselves, are not perfect in love. Indeed, the more we come to understand the teachings of God's Word, the more of sympathy we may have with the poor "groaning creation." In one sense of the word our sympathies are all for this glorious standard which the Apostle holds up before us. We cannot sympathize with the evil, the error, the wrong. It is uncongenial to us. But, understanding the situation, we can sympathize with our fellows and with ourselves, as being in a fallen condition, in which none of us can do the things which we would.

The Scriptural key to the situation is that as a race we were born and shapen in iniquity and in sin did our mothers conceive us. The calamity of sin, imperfection and death affecting us morally, mentally and physically, has injured the whole world and made us what the Apostle describes a "groaning creation." How this knowledge of the facts of the case possessed by so few, understood and appreciated by so few, should tend to make these few a peculiar people in their loving sympathies and kindnesses towards their fellows in distress! Alas, the difficulty is that even these few who know these facts from the Divine Word have selfishness so ingrained in their constitutions, and are so oppressed by the cares of this life that their sympathies are often not all that they should be.

NEW CREATURES ONLY APPEALED TO

It is for these reasons that the Scriptures do not address the natural man – because his mind is so sodden with selfishness that his eye of pity and his ear of sympathy are well nigh closed. Instead of appealing to the natural man in general, the Scriptures represent that the Lord specially draws some possessed of certain qualities of heart and mind, and specially leads these to a knowledge of the Redeemer, leaving it open with them to accept or to reject the offer of Divine grace and forgiveness. Such as respond are still further enlightened and, if further responsive, they are treated as justified because of their faith in Jesus and his blood; then are granted further to them special opportunities, and exhortations to make a full consecration of themselves to the Lord and his service forever – unto death. If they still respond and make this consecration they then have come to the place where the Lord is pleased to reckon them dead to earthly things, according to their profession, and to beget them of the holy Spirit and the glorious promises of his Word, and to count them as New Creatures in Christ – as members of the Redeemer's Body, which is the Church.

Now they have reached the stage where, as children of God, they must go to school and develop in knowledge and in character – to be made actually fit, prepared, suitable, for eternal life and a share with their Redeemer in his Kingdom.

THE LESSONS OF THE SCHOOL

When we enter the School of Christ, the lesson, as a whole, set before us is expressed in the Great Teacher's words, "Be ye like unto your Father which is in heaven." The same thought is presented to us in the Apostle's words when he assures us that God has predetermined that only such as become copies of his dear Son – in character likeness – can be his joint-heirs in the promised Kingdom. We did not know that so much was required when we entered the School of Christ. We did not understand all that we

did when we made our consecration even unto death in the service of righteousness. However, no advantage was taken of us; for what was presented to us and what we did consecrate to do, includes everything in our power and no more – even unto death. So, then, no lesson that can come to us is beyond our covenant or agreement to perform.

The Apostle in the spectrum of love given us in this lesson is delineating the various parts of this one great lesson of Christ-likeness, which is God-likeness. He is pointing out what constitutes such a character as God desires we shall have, and such as God has predetermined we must have, in order to be worthy of the gift of God, eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

LOVE VIEWED IN COMPARISON

It beareth all things; believeth all things; hopeth all things; endureth all things. Its elements of patience and gentleness are love in the sense of willingness to bear, to endure under all sorts of opposition, wherever it sees a proper subject for its sympathy. It believeth all things in the sense that it is not given to doubt, to disbelieve, to impugn the motives and truthfulness of its fellows. Only after full and convincing proofs to the contrary will it cease to exercise faith. Love hopeth all things in the sense that it desires a blessing for all with whom it is in contact and is continually striving, in harmony with its desire, to do them good. Love endureth all things in the sense that it cannot be quenched wherever there is anything that it can properly exercise itself upon. These **[R4444 : page 230]** qualities viewed from another standpoint might be interpreted thus: "Beareth all things," as enduring pressure on every side without being crushed; "Believeth all things" as being full of faith in the Divine promises and arrangement, doubting nothing; "Hopeth all things" in the sense that this perfect love toward God enables the heart to be full of confidence toward the Almighty One, in whose love it reposes;

"Endureth all things" in the sense that the soul that is united to the God of Love by the link of love cannot be crushed, cannot be overcome, because this is the Divine will, the Divine arrangement. God will not suffer such to be tempted above that they are able to bear, but will, with every temptation, provide a way of escape.

The Apostle institutes a comparison as between love and some of the "gifts" which the Corinthian brethren properly estimated highly. He would have us all see how infinitely higher Love is than any of these gifts in which the early Church rejoiced. Love is not a gift, but a growth, a fruitage which must be developed in the garden of our souls and be tended with much care, in order to its proper development. He says that Love never faileth; but that other things will fail, namely, the power of prophesy or oratory, the gift of tongues, knowledge, etc. These would lose their value as the changing conditions would comparatively do away with their necessity. Prophesying would be done away with, the gift of tongues would cease, and knowledge would vanish. The Apostle's argument is that these things would all come to an end necessarily, when perfection would come in, because all of our gifts and talents are imperfect. Surely with our glorious "change" in the First Resurrection and with the ushering in of the Millennium our conditions would be so different that many things highly esteemed in the lesser light and under the unfavorable conditions of the present would then be valueless. Just so flints were once valuable for the striking of a light, but are now never used, being supplanted by matches, electric lights, etc. Many of those gifts, however, including the gift of tongues, perished long before the morning light of the Millennium – ceased shortly after the death of the Apostles, because those gifts were imparted only by the Apostles.

Next the Apostle compares the gifts of the Spirit with the fruitage of the Spirit and shows that the former, in **[R4444 : page 231]** contrast with the latter, were as the toys of childhood in

comparison with the valuables of manhood. "When I was a child, I spake as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things." So the gifts of tongues, interpretation of tongues, etc., were given to the Church in its infancy and served useful purposes then, but might well be put away as the Church emerged from infancy to the strength and development accruing from a greater knowledge of God's great Plan. The milk of the Word and the strong meat of the Word were intended by God to develop the members of the Body of Christ, until they all come to the stature of manhood in Christ. The more advanced the Christian, the more surely would he know that the gifts of the Spirit were merely like a childish plaything to be supplemented by the fruits of the Spirit, much more valuable to the Church in its developed condition.

St. Paul points us further to the fact that we are living not merely for the present, but specially for the future; and that whatever we can develop here which will last us into the eternal future, must certainly be the most important matter for us to acquire. He would have us see that most important thing to the Christian – love – the Love which he has described. Our knowledge, tongues, etc., of the present time are only mere shadows of the great powers which will be ours, if we attain to the glorious blessings of the First Resurrection. Whatever clearness of sight we have at the present time we shall then find but darkness in comparison with that full light of the glorious morning-time. Where now we see as through an obscure glass, then we shall see face to face. Now we know in part; then we shall know as we are known.

FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE

St. Paul would have the Church see that faith, hope and love, three *fruits* of the Spirit, are far superior to all the "*gifts*" of the Spirit of any kind, because these will abide all through the age. Until the Millennial morning we shall need faith; we shall need

hope; we shall need love. We cannot get along without them. We cannot make any progress in the footsteps of Jesus without them. But if we seek to contrast these imperfect qualities amongst themselves, he points out that the chiefest of these is love. Why the chiefest? Because it is the Divine quality without which, with all the other qualities possessed, we should still be unsatisfactory to God. It is the quality which will persist to all eternity. We shall always need to have love, if we abide in Divine favor. As for faith and hope, excellent qualities though they be, the time will come when they will be swallowed up by sight, by fruition, by the actualities of the glorious condition of fellowship with the Lord. But Love will never fail. Amongst all the graces of the Spirit it stands supreme and eternal.

Only because of serious misconceptions of Love is it necessary or even proper for us to remind our readers, in the Apostle's words, that this love quality is not merely a form of loving words, nor merely kind words and smiles, but that it goes deeply into our natures and includes our deeds and our heart sentiments. – 1 John 3:18.

OUR HEAVENLY HOME

To little children "home" is that dear place where *Mother* is,
Where every wound doth ever find the healing kiss of love,
And little sobbing hearts are soothed to rest upon her breast.
In later years that dear word "home" awakes the precious thought
Of loving wife and happy little ones, and peace and rest, –
A refuge sweet where outside cares and worries cannot come.
And when the sun of life is sinking in the west we dream
Of "home" as that blest gathering place where often through the
year
Our children, and their children, come with wealth of grateful
love,

That makes our hearts forget the pain and toil of former years.

But to *the Christian*, though the earthly loves be near and dear,
The thought of "home" belongs to that most heavenly place where
God,

And Christ, and all the holy angels are, where sorrow finds
No place, and every longing heart is fully satisfied;
Where we shall love and serve him perfectly, and meet again,
Nor ever part from fellow-pilgrims on "the narrow way;"
Where we shall sit with Christ upon his throne, and bless with
peace

And joy the whole creation, groaning now in pain and tears!

And year by year *the golden chain* grows longer, that doth draw
Us closer to our heavenly home, as one by one, "the priests"
In silence pass beneath "the veil" – each one *an added link*.
Ah, then, to gain an entrance to that blest abode, shall we
Not count the present things but "loss and dross," and lightly touch
Each object that might hold our heart's affections to this earth, –
For *where our treasure is, e'en there our hearts will also be!*

– G. W. Seibert.

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