

THE PROPERTIES OF LOVE

I Corinthians 13:4

Paul declared that all of the desirable and highly-praised gifts of the Holy Spirit, namely, eloquence, prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, faith, charity and martyrdom, are without value apart from love. He portrayed love as the great essential in and the very heart of the Christian life. When true love is enthroned in the heart it rules the entire life; it colors the thoughts, prompts the speech and directs the actions. There is not any part of life that is not beautified by its presence.

One wonders if a better pen portrait of Christ can be found than in these four verses. As we read them we can see the blessed Saviour moving about in this world on His mission of love. If one is a genuine Christian, he will be a follower of Christ. Our Lord certainly demonstrated to the world how love manifests itself in daily life. To love like this is to be like Christ, and the degree of our failure to do so is the measure of our unlikeness to Him. In our text is a portrait of what a real Christian is meant to be, both in character and in conduct. A careful and prayerful study of this love, which was manifested so beautifully in the life of Christ, may make us uncomfortable and unhappy, but it will do us great good.

I. Love Is Not Impatient.

"Love suffereth long." Possibly more than any other word, "longsuffering," portrays God's attitude toward disobedient, sinful men. Repeatedly He exemplified this subjective quality in His relationship to and dealings with the Israelites.

When Christ came to reveal the Father's glory He displayed this attitude of restraint. He was longsuffering with His stupid disciples and malicious foes alike, patient under hatred and persecution, and under such agonies of body and mind as are beyond our imagination to conceive. In Him patience did her perfect work.

Has not God also been longsuffering with us? In spite of all our follies and unfaithfulness, our sins against light and love, our hardness of heart and our rebellious acts, He has never ceased to be patient and gracious. "He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10). Since God has been so patient and longsuffering with us, it is only reasonable to expect Him to require us to manifest the same grace.

The normal state of love is placid, calm and composed. There is an absence of that petulance which disturbs us. Its poise is beautifully apparent under the fire of misunderstanding and disapproval. Love does not become impatient when tried, when wronged, when it has to face misunderstanding and when people disapprove. Longsuffering is the word which is used of the man who has been wronged and who has it easily in his power to avenge himself and yet will not do it. It describes the man who refuses to give way to anger. It expresses

an attitude of restraint and implies a victory over resentment. Such patience is not the sign of weakness, but of strength; it is not defeatism, but rather the only way to victory.

A person who is patient and longsuffering is always slow to take offense. Others are rather quick to do so. Frequently somebody, from some trivial and imagined slight, threatens to quit and leave a church. Friends may be thoughtless and forgetful, misunderstanding and ungrateful, careless and neglectful. As a rule, most of the pain and hardship inflicted by friends is unintentional. Nonetheless, it is hard to bear. The dearer the friendship and the closer the relationship, the greater will be the injury.

No one treated Abraham Lincoln with more contempt than did Stanton. He called him "a low cunning clown." He nicknamed him "the original gorilla" and said that Du Chaillu was a fool to wander about Africa trying to capture a gorilla when he could have found one so easily at Springfield, Illinois. President Lincoln never replied to those remarks. He appointed Stanton Secretary of War because he was the best man for the job. He treated Stanton with every courtesy. The years wore on. The night came when the assassin's bullet murdered Lincoln in Ford's Theater. In the little room to which the President's body was taken there stood that same Stanton that night, and, looking down on the silent face of Lincoln in all its ruggedness, Stanton said through his tears, "There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen." The patience of love had conquered in the end.

Love endures everything. It does not stand up for its rights. Frequently others are quite annoying. Our first reaction to their mistreatment of us is commonly, especially if we are fine-edged, to lose our patience, erupt in anger, feel offended, seek revenge and attempt retaliation. This is not the way of love though, according to God's Word. Love suffers long. It accepts everything that happens because it looks beyond the present and to the end.

Our text says, "Love suffereth long, and is kind." Patience is passive endurance while kindness is active service. Patience is love's endurance of ill and evil while kindness is love's activity in good. Patience is love waiting with folded hands while kindness is love working with busy hands. Patience is being good while kindness is doing good.

Kindness is a virtue that is in danger of being undervalued, especially by people of strong individuality. Such persons often imagine that they do not need the help of others. They think they can make their own way in the world, so they only ask for a fair chance and no favor. They are apt to regard kindness as a trivial and unimportant matter, very suitable for small and commonplace souls to practice, but almost beneath their notice. When they do a kind act it is with a sort of condescension, and as a momentary concession to human weakness.

This view, however is wrong. In kindness God gave His Son, in kindness Christ gave His life's blood and in kindness the Holy Spirit ministers continually to our deepest needs. We must no longer regard kindness as one of the minor virtues. Many have been influenced to accept Christ as Saviour because of the acts of kindness of some faithful Christian. There are those around us whose burdens we can lighten by kind words and helpful deeds. We can bring a cheering ray of light into some dark hearts. Kind acts may seem little enough in themselves. The encouraging word is not a trivial matter. It is a gracious and noble task to infuse heart and hope into weary and despairing souls. Love alone can teach us the art of kindness. One of the truly great things which we can do for our Heavenly Father is to be kind to His children. An elderly Scotch minister, upon hearing his people censure each other with merciless criticism, said to them, "Remember, if you are not very kind, you are not very holy, because holiness and kindness cannot be separated." What a glorious truth!

II. Love Is Not Envious.

"Love envieth not." A more wonderful thing than that cannot be said about love. Envy is obviously quite distinct from covetousness, though often closely associated with it. Covetousness is an unlawful desire for the possessions of others, while envy is a hatred of another because he has something which the envious person wishes that he did not have. Envy always causes a person to want to deprive another of something he has. That is why Hannah More called envy "the ugliest field of hell," and Shakespeare described it as "the green-eyed monster."

This hideous and deadly vice is often found concealed, and sometimes unrecognized, in lives where its presence and working are least expected. That is why the followers of Christ are warned against it in the Scriptures, in addition to the fact that it has always been regarded with horror, condemned by writers in the strongest terms and pictured by artists in the most repulsive forms.

Through the centuries there have been inequalities between men. There have been inequalities of talent, position, opportunity and attainment. There have been inequalities of physical strength, mental endowment, moral vigor and spiritual achievement. Such inequalities are sometimes the source from which envy springs. There were inequalities between the first two who were born upon this earth. These inequalities begot murderous envy. Cain envied his brother because of his superior goodness and consequent favor with God. On fire with murderous hatred of his brother in the flesh, Cain could not bear to think that Abel was better than himself. "And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him."

Envy also was the cause of the cruelty of Joseph's brethren. Turn to the thirty-seventh chapter of Genesis and trace the course of envy. "His brethren saw that their father loved him....and they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him. And they hated him yet the more....and envied him....and cast him into one of the pits....and said an evil beast hath devoured him." Indeed, an evil beast was devouring them -- the evil beast of envy!

One of the vilest crimes in the Old Testament was the murder of Naboth, and it was due to envy seeking that which belonged to another, and to which it had no just right or claim.

The cruelty of envy reached its climax at the cross. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "They hated me without a cause." Pilate "knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy."

Envy crushes and destroys all sense of right, whether that sense be legal or moral. This begrudging sense of relative inferiority finds a place in the hearts of so many. It causes a person to begrudge the fact that others have something which he does not think they should have. Envy stamps its possessor as spiritually deficient, morally warped and mentally incapable. Envy is one of the last vices to be eradicated out of the human heart.

Love is not vexed at the superiority of others, begrudging them their endowments and privileges and advantages. Great illustrations of love without envy are seen in the attitude of Jonathan towards David and of John the Baptist toward Christ. John the Baptist was the most popular preacher in Palestine until Christ came. As soon as the Lord Jesus began to preach, John the Baptist took the second place. Some of his devoted followers were jealous of the Saviour's popularity, so they tried to kindle envy in the heart of John the Baptist. When they protested to John he said, "This my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." Thus he merited our undying admiration because of his willingness to take second place for the good of the cause.

When Barnabas found the work at Antioch becoming too much for him to do single-handed, he began to look around for someone whom he could invite to share his labors. His mind reverted to Saul of Tarsus. Now if Barnabas had harbored a scrap of jealousy in his soul, he never would have chosen Saul for a colleague, for he was a far abler man than himself. By sheer ability Saul was bound inevitably to take the first place. But Barnabas had a heart that was too big for mean and ugly considerations of place and position. All that he cared for was the Lord and others, and their relationship to each other. Barnabas had the love which envieth not, so he went forth to Tarsus to seek for Saul, and when he had found him he brought him to Antioch. "Love envieth not." Love has no ill feeling whatsoever at the honor, success or prosperity of others.