

THE PROPERTIES OF LOVE

I Corinthians 13:4c-6

The first three verses of I Corinthians 13 clearly set forth the pre-eminence of love. They declare 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. True love is the very heart of the Christian life. It colors the thoughts, prompts the speech and directs the actions. From verse four we have already learned that love is not impatient -- "love suffereth long, and is kind," and love is not envious -- "love envieth not." Continuing our study of this verse and paragraph, we note some additional properties or characteristics of love.

III. Love Is Not Boastful.

"Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up." To vaunt and to be puffed up are closely related or are two manifestations of the same sin. To vaunt is to speak or act boastfully; to be puffed up is to feel boastfully. To vaunt is to strut like a peacock; to be puffed up is to swell like a porpoise or whale.

"Vaunteth not itself" refers to outward behavior; "is not puffed up" refers to inward disposition. It is because people have an exaggerated sense of their own importance that they strut and swagger before their associates. In other words, parade in the life is the result of pride in the heart. Pride is the inward feeling; parade is the outward failing.

Paul was thinking of the disputatious and quarrelsome members of the church at Corinth. Many of them were puffed up with a sense of the importance of their individual gifts, and vaunted themselves over others who had different gifts. Paul knew that a man is puffed up and vaunts himself in order to demonstrate his own greatness or to prove his superiority to others.

As love does not begrudge the gifts of others, so it is not eager to show off its own. Love is not inflated with its own importance. Love is never inflated with self-conceit. Love is not a braggart or boaster, nor is love the hero of its own stories. It does not seek admiration and applause. Love never tries to draw attention to itself. Love never attempts to display its ability or any supposed superiority. Ostentation desires to win the admiration and to gain the applause of others, but love never strives to do that. Like the frog in Aesop's fable that was so puffed up with conceit that it tried to blow itself up to be as big as a cow, some people are so puffed up in character they vaunt themselves in conduct.

Pride cannot exist where love reigns. A braggart is easily recognized wherever he appears. He is always boasting of his own exploits, his superior wisdom and his remarkable achievements. Love knows nothing of presumptuous self-satisfaction or of pride with contempt of others. Love is never haughty, but always humble and gracious. The man in whose heart love dwells never seeks to be first, but he ever strives to be the servant of all. Love does not put itself into public notice or aspire to the limelight, nor does it ever cause anybody to crowd out others.

Recall, for example, some of the characteristics of Him Who was love incarnate. Knowing that boasting is always an advertisement of poverty, Christ constantly performed great deeds of mercy, but He never bragged on Himself. He did not strut and seek to draw attention to Himself. When He had healed the leper, He gave him instructions to tell no man. Christ did not parade His goodness; He did not vaunt Himself.

He was satisfied just to serve the sick and the afflicted. In contrast with the Saviour and Lord are those who refuse to participate in helpful services unless they are given the first place and their names are trumpeted abroad. But that is not the temper of love. Love is modest and ready to stoop. Love cares nothing for its own reputation so long as it can serve. Think of our Lord Jesus on the night of His betrayal. On their way to the Upper Room the disciples had been disputing as to which of them was the greatest. Each of them had been emphasizing his own claims to the highest place. When they arrived and took their seats, none of them would stoop to perform the humble task of foot-washing. None of them would act as servant for the rest. So Christ Himself arose, laid aside His garments, girded Himself with a towel, poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded. In that remarkable deed we see love in action. He, Who was the greatest of all, stooped to perform the lowliest service. In doing so He revealed the true nature of love. True love never seeks to be superior, but it does try to serve.

A really great man never thinks of his own importance. It is only little people who strut and insist upon their importance. All boasting and self-inflation are an evidence and an advertisement of littleness. That which is big does not need to boast or inflate itself. The sun does not boast. The mountains do not boast. The ocean does not boast. Their greatness is plain, obvious and unmistakable. Love does not have any need to boast or inflate itself. Since love is what Henry Drummond called "the greatest thing in the world," its greatness cannot be denied. It is like the sun, the mountain or ocean in that it is great beyond challenge or dispute. So, a great man does not display conceit, vanity or pride. William Carey was one of the greatest missionaries and linguists the world has ever seen. He translated at

least parts of the Bible into thirty-four Indian languages. Carey began life as a shoe cobbler. When he went to India he was regarded with dislike and contempt. Once at a dinner party a snob, with the idea of humiliating him, said in a tone that everyone could hear, "I suppose, Mr. Carey, you once worked as a shoe-maker." "No, your lordship," answered Carey, "not a shoe-maker, only a cobbler." He did not even claim to make shoes, but only to mend them. Nobody likes a self-important person.

IV. Love Is Not Rude.

Love "doth not behave itself unseemly." Love is never rude. Alas, some who call themselves Christians can be very rude. Some are even proud of their rudeness. They pride themselves upon being plain, blunt people who say what they think. They take great credit to themselves for always speaking their minds. That would not be such a bad thing if their minds were always worth speaking, but so often they are not. Such persons would do well to meditate on that passage in God's Word which says, "A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards" (Proverbs 29:11).

Love is the most effective teacher of politeness and courtesy. Love begets courtesy, consideration and gentleness, and these are the qualities that make the fine-mannered person. Love contributes that fine and noble sense of gentlemanliness or womanliness. Love softens the hard lines and smooths the sharp edges. Certainly a campaign for good manners is long overdue.

Love never degrades the object of its affection by behaving unseemly towards it. Love never cheapens the one who is loved. Unseemly behavior, which is the result of selfish pushfulness, would be banished from the lives of Christians if they would only learn to love one another. The confusion and disorder which existed in the church at Corinth arose from the fact that each considered his contribution more important than that which was made by anybody else, and each was intent on his own glory. At the root of their unbecoming conduct lay self-importance, conceit and pride. Having a keen sense of the fitness of things, love never does that which is unbecoming. Love knows instinctively how to do the right thing at the right time, delights to set people at their ease and avoids needlessly hurting the feelings of others. To do right is good, but to do the right in a fine way is still better, and that is exactly what love teaches us to do. Love causes one to do good things in a fine way. It always causes one to recoil from rudeness.

V. Love Is Not Selfish.

Love "seeketh not her own." Love does not look out for self first. Love is not too concerned for her own interests. Love does not insist upon and grasp for its rights. Love does not pursue its own interests or struggle for its share

and more. I have heard professing Christians say, "If I don't look after my own interests, nobody else will." I am happy to testify that I know from experience that this is not true. God is still able to take care of the welfare of His own. Therefore, it is well to leave Him to safeguard our rights if we, who owe everything to Him, have any. Love is blissfully content to leave its all to His love. In the last analysis, there are two kinds of people in the world -- those who are continually thinking of their rights and those who are continually thinking of their duties; those who always insist upon their privileges and those who always remember their responsibilities; those who are always thinking of what life owes them and those who never forget what they owe to life. The welfare of others is always in love's motive, whatever it may be doing. Its learning is for the benefit of others; its toil is for the good of others; its prayers, faith and sacrifices are for the cleansing and comforting of others.

VI. Love Is Not Easily Provoked.

Love "is not easily provoked." Irritability springs directly and instantly from selfishness. It is only self-centered people who are touchy and easily exasperated. This sin is often the one blot on an otherwise noble character. Bad temper is one of the most prevalent and baneful things today.

There are two great classes of sins -- the sins of the body and the sins of the disposition. It is on the sins of the body that most people pronounce their heaviest condemnation. But are they right? They brand drunkenness and impurity as heinous sins, and they are that. But are they worse than the sins of the disposition? Frequently the cause of Christ is done a greater injury and the church is put in a worse light by conceited, self-centered, self-assertive and controversial members than ever results from other members who commit the other sins of the flesh. Satan is never more pleased than when he can get members to cause friction in a church. The "touchy" person is a thorn in the side of all who have to deal with him. He is the cause of endless trouble in many a household, in many a business and in many a church.

The only cure for this devastating vice of irritability is love. Love is not irritable. There are all kinds of little annoyances and petty injustices in life which can irritate us if we allow them. But love has a way of ignoring pin-pricks, and keeping calm and good-natured in spite of them all. Love is not swift to take offense. Christian love never becomes exasperated with people. Exasperation is always a sign of defeat. There is a vast difference between righteous anger at wrong and irritability over a small inconvenience or grievance. Love is capable of the former, but not of the latter. People do not gain anything worthwhile by losing their tempers. Kipling said that it was

the test of a man if he could keep his head when everyone else was losing his and blaming it on him, and if when he was hated he did not give way to hating. Nobody ever saw love in a display of temper.

Love never flies into a temper. When a person loses his temper, love is driven from the throne of his heart. So long as love humbly, patiently, gently, sympathetically and generously holds away, the loss of temper will be impossible.

VII. Love Is Not Vindictive.

Love "thinketh no evil." The love that "thinketh no evil" is the love that has no memory of injuries. It does not keep a ledger for the entry of wrongs done to it. Christian love refuses to store up the memory of any wrong to which it has been subjected. Love never harbors a grudge or plots harm to anybody. It was said of Abraham Lincoln that he never forgot a kindness, but that he did not have any room in his mind for the memory of a wrong. Truly, one of the fine arts is to learn what to forget. Too many nurse their wrath in order to keep it warm. They brood over their injuries until they cannot forget them. So much misery is caused by brooding over injustices. But Christian love has learned the great lesson of forgetting.

Love is not inflamed with resentment at every little slight, whether it be imagined or actual, undesigned or intentional. One of the sinister forms of bad temper is the sullen and vindictive spirit. In a case like this there may not be an outburst of anger, but the victim of it pickles down his displeasure as if in brine, nourishes a grudge against the one who has offended him and holds his malice until he has an opportunity for revenge. All such should remember that Christ said, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). Love does not look for faults and evil motives in others, but credits them with the best possible motives. "Faults are thick where love is thin."

VIII. Love Does Not Rejoice In Evil.

Love "rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth." What a person rejoices in is an accurate revelation of his character. It is one of the queer traits of human nature that frequently a person prefers to hear of the misfortune of others rather than of their good fortune; he is much more interested in hearing a spicy story to the discredit of another than a story to his praise. It is certainly a reflection on the character and the religion of any person who takes delight in hearing of the misdeeds and failures of others. Love is never glad when others go wrong. Love is opposed to and grieved by sin, but it never makes capital out of the faults of others. Christian love never gloats

over the mistakes and failures of anybody. It never takes any pleasure in hearing or telling stories to the disparagement of other people. Love rejoices only over the things that are true and right. If one is glad that another person has gone wrong, he certainly does not have the spirit of Christ and is not following Him.