



COMMENTARIES ON “I CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 13

St. Paul begins 1 Corinthians 13 with the “more excellent way” he mentions in chapter 12 (12:31): the way of love. He states that, even if his spiritual achievements were of the very greatest sort, but he had no love for others, then those achievements would be worthless. For example, if he was particularly gifted in speaking with different kinds of tongues (see 12:10) - even, he says, the tongues of angels (13:1) - but was unloving, then he would be of no more worth than a brass gong or a clanging cymbal (which, in the original Greek word, refers to a particularly wailing instrument) (13:1). Likewise, if he were given the gift of prophecy (see 12:10), gifted to understand all mysteries and knowledge (see 12:8), and even had such faith that he would be empowered to move mountains (see Matthew 17:20; 21:21) - all of this would be nothing if he did not have love for others (13:2). Even unstinting charity, and even martyrdom itself, would not benefit the Christian who does not have love. As St. John Chrysostom concludes, “In other words, says, Paul, if I have no love I am not just useless but a positive nuisance.”

It is not enough to simply tell people to “have love,” because the word “love” can be grossly misused; in our modern culture “love” is used to refer from everything from the slightest emotional or physical attraction to sexual activity. St. Paul therefore gives a definition in verses 4-8 of what constitutes true love: it is longsuffering and kind (13:4), it rejoices in truth (13:6); it is supremely patient, understanding, and hopeful (13:7); in a word, “Love never fails” (13:8).

We should note that St. Paul’s explanation says not only what love is (virtue), but also what love is not (vices). St. John Chrysostom points out, “He adorns love not only for what it has but also for what it has not. Love both elicits virtue and expels vice, not permitting it to spring up at all.” We can identify a person who bears the fruit of the Spirit that is love in part by the absence of the works of the flesh (see Galatians 5:19-21).

The Church Fathers tell us a great deal about these attributes of love:

Love is not puffed up: “The reason why love does not envy is because it is not puffed up. For where puffing up precedes, envy follows, because pride is the mother of envy” - Blessed Augustine.

“Love is not puffed up...arrogance is like a very tall but rotten tree. All of its branches are brittle and if someone climbs upon it, he immediately falls from the height he has attained” - St. Ephraim the Syrian.

Love does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in all truth: “Love hates what is unjust and rejoices in what is good and honorable” - Theodoret of Cyr.

Love bears all things: “Bearing all things, enduring all things for our love and hope regarding Him, let us give thanks for all things, both favorable and unfavorable alike - I mean the pleasant and the painful -

since reason often knows even these as arms of salvation” - St. Gregory the Theologian.

“A man with this charity fears nothing, for charity casts out fear. When fear is banished and cast out, charity endures all things, bears all things. One who bears all things through love cannot fear martyrdom” - St. Ambrose of Milan.

St. John Chrysostom summarizes the necessity of defeating sin with love: “Love for one another makes us immaculate. There is not a single sin, which the power of love, like fire, would not destroy. It is easier for feeble brushwood to withstand a powerful fire than for the nature of sin to withstand the power of love. Let us increase this love in our souls, in order to stand with all the saints, for they, too, all pleased God well by love for their neighbors.” It is for this reason that St. Polycarp says, “He that has love is far from every sin.”

The fact that love will never fail is significant, because it is the one thing listed in chapters twelve and thirteen that will not cease (13:8). Fr. Lawrence Farley explains:

Speaking in unknown tongues will cease, because in the coming age all unknown things will become known and all will speak the same universal language of the spirit’s communion in love. Even knowledge and prophecies will be abolished, because our experience of even these great gifts is conditioned by this age.

In fact, the gifts of prophecy and knowledge given now by the Holy Spirit are only partial: God has not yet revealed to us everything there is for us to know and speak (13:9). The things which Christians can know and speak are not erroneous - Blessed Augustine says, “Our knowledge in this life remains imperfect, but it is reliable within its limits” - but there will come a day in which God perfects all things, and there will then be no need for individual Christians to possess limited gifts of knowledge or prophecy (13:10). As St. Basil the Great teaches:

Even though more knowledge is always being acquired by everyone, it will ever fall short in all things of its rightful completeness until the time when that which is perfect being comes, that which which is in part will be done away.

St. Paul likens our situation to that of being an adult versus being a child (13:11). When you are a child, your thoughts, understanding and speech are restricted by the limited abilities of a child, but all of these things increase as you grow to adulthood. Similarly, seeing things in a dim mirror gives you a significantly inferior view to looking directly at the objects (13:12). These give us some idea of what St. Paul has taught us about the spiritual gifts: they are appropriate to our situation now, but in the future - after God perfects all things - we shall no longer need them. At that time, as Fr. Lawrence Farley says, “Even as we are really-known by God, so that no part of our existence is left beyond His loving reach, with this same completeness will we also really-know ourselves and each other.”

What will continue into that day are faith, hope and love (13:13). The greatest of these is love, St. Cyprian of Carthage teaches, because “it excels both good works and suffering of the faith. As an eternal virtue, it will abide with us forever in the kingdom of heaven.”

