

A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

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Chapter Thirteen

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Greatest Gift

BACKGROUND: Having expounded upon the various gifts of the Holy Spirit, their relative importance, and their role in the Church, Paul turns to the gift of love: the one that tops them all.

13:1. *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.* Love is the best of God's many gifts; the ability to speak in tongues is considered the least important (see 1 Cor 12:28). If he who can speak in all the languages of Heaven and of earth does not also love God and his neighbor (Mk 12:30-31), his linguistic abilities are as useless as *sounding brass or a clanging cymbal*, instruments which produce dull empty sounds and can be disturbing when not accompanied by other more melodious sounds.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). What is the best way to express love to "God and neighbor"? Who is our neighbor?

13:2. *And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.* Even if he possessed to a high degree those gifts considered superior to speaking in tongues: prophecy, knowledge and faith, if he did not, in addition possess love, it would be as if he had nothing.

Have faith with love, for love without faith you cannot have. I warn you...have faith with love; for it is possible to have faith without love. I am not exhorting you to have faith, but to have charity. For you cannot have charity without faith: I mean the love of God and your neighbor: where can these come from without faith? How does anyone love God, who does not believe in God? How does the fool love God who says in his heart: "There is no God" (Ps 14:1)? It could be that you believe Christ has come, yet not love Christ. But it cannot be that you love Christ, yet affirm that Christ has not come.

AUGUSTINE¹

Faith which expresses itself in an attempt to be Christ-like leads to love, which leads to the Kingdom. Faith that does not lead to love that is demonstrated by good works is useless for the Kingdom, as the Book of James makes clear (Jas 2:14-26). Satan has faith (knowledge) that God is the Creator and that Jesus is His Son and the Savior of mankind (Jas 2:19). Yet his faith led not to love but to rebellion, and to a continued all-out effort to cause as many as possible to fall from grace with him (Rev 12:17).

This verse brings to mind the words of invitation to participate in Divine Eucharist: "With the fear of God, with faith and with love draw near." It often happens that one initially turns to God through fear: of events in life, of the unknown, of death and judgment. This is an example of how God can turn even the negative to good. If because of one's fear he begins to search for answers to life's complexities and finds the meaningful answers that can only be found with God, fear will produce faith, because only through the light of God's divine plan do life and death make sense and become purposeful. Through continual spiritual growth in the image of Christ, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, faith then progresses to love. Hence the invitation to step forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ hints at the natural progression of spiritual growth, if it is continually nurtured: from fear to faith to the epitome, love, the last step in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* described by *John Climacus*.

Fear shows up if ever love departs, for the man with no fear is either filled with love or is dead in spirit.²

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). God is love (1 Jn 4:8). He loves us all! In what sense, then, is He to be feared? (Read Jude 20-23.)

13.3. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned but have not love, it profits me nothing. It is possible for a person to give all that he has to the poor and even to give his life, for motives other than love. One may desire, for instance, to be well thought of by family and friends, or by the world, or to be remembered in history. Another may be motivated by fear of Hell or may think that he can buy Heaven. These sacrifices are useless and empty gestures, which will not be recognized by God, if they are devoid of love. *Chrysostom* explains that God commands not merely the deed but wants the heart of the giver to be entwined with his gift:

God wants us not merely to give without sympathy, but to ... grieve with the needy. This is why God invites almsgiving. He could have nourished the poor Himself...but that He might bind us together unto charity and that we might be thoroughly fervent toward each other, He commanded them to be nourished by us.³ (Read Jn 13:34-35.)

13:4-7. Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Paul offers a definition of love which causes all others to pale by comparison. He who loves...

-**is long-suffering:** does not strike back in anger when insulted or treated unjustly, he returns good for evil, time after time. How many times should we forgive? (...until seventy times seven/Mt 18:22).

- **is kind:** treats his beloved (every human being—even his enemies/Mt 5:44) as he would like to be treated.

-**does not envy:** resists bad feelings about someone who possesses something he does not.

-**is humble:** does not look for glory for himself but for his beloved. (To put another ahead of oneself is impossible without the gift of humility.)

-**is not puffed up:** not egotistical, but modest and level-headed, knowing that all the good things about himself and his life are gifts from God.

-**does not behave rudely:** is considerate of others, behaves properly, so as not to offend his beloved.

-**is not selfish:** puts the interests of his beloved ahead of his own.

-**is not provoked:** not easily irritated or ready to take offense.

-**thinks no evil:** since he who loves does not readily take offense, he neither allows resentment to build up, nor plans revenge, nor is quick to think evil of his beloved.

-**does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in truth:** hates evil and takes no joy in recognizing another's evil deeds in order to elevate his own standing but rejoices whenever God's good shines forth.

-**bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things:** accepts difficulties good-naturedly, always believes the best of his beloved, always has high hopes, but realistically presses on in whatever situation he finds himself.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). The word "love" is often used very loosely. How can Paul's definition of love be helpful to a couple attracted to each other?...in any relationship?...in our relationship with God?...in interaction with our "enemy" (Mt 5:44)?

13:8. Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. True love embraces all these qualities unendingly. Though everything comes to an end, including prophecies, tongues and the imperfect knowledge of the world, which will not be necessary in the fullness of God's Kingdom of Heaven, true love continues eternally.

13:9-10. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. Whatever spiritual understanding we are able to develop in our lifetime is only partial as compared to the perfect, total knowledge possible in the Kingdom of Heaven:

Now we know that God is everywhere, but how, we know not. That He made out of things that are not the things that are we know; but of the manner we are ignorant. That He was born of a virgin, we know; but how, we know not yet. But then we shall know somewhat more and clearer concerning these things. CHRYSOSTOM⁴

13:11. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. Just as an adult normally has greater understanding than a child, one who has entered into the eternal Kingdom of Heaven will have a fuller understanding of God's ways than he did when he was bound by the earthly life. However, even this knowledge will not be the perfect knowledge that God has but one that will continue to grow as we advance in perfection in His image (Gen 1:26), "from glory to glory" (see this study for 1 Cor 2:10-13).

13:12. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. Our present knowledge is partial because of our imperfections, as though we were observing God and His plan for us through a faulty mirror, which reflects a combination of what we want to see and what we have been taught to see. When we enter the fullness of the Kingdom, we will have clear vision, with no obstacles separating us from God. We shall know Him as He knows us.

Not that we shall know Him as He is, but that even as He hastened toward us now, so also shall we cling unto Him then, and shall know many of the things which are now secret and shall enjoy that most blessed society and wisdom. CHRYSOSTOM⁵

God does all He can, without taking away our gift of free will, to bring us to Him. We shall, with that same fervor, cling to Him then.

13:13. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. Love is greater than faith and hope, because the need for them will cease with the Second Coming of Christ, when the fullness of God's eternal Kingdom has been established. But love will continue.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (d). Why will faith and hope no longer be necessary after the Second Coming of Christ? Why will love continue?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). What is the best way to express love to “God and neighbor”? Who is our neighbor? The first four of the Ten Commandments God gave to Moses deal with man's relationship with God. The last six deal with man's relationship with man. When asked which was the most important of these Commandments, Jesus said that the first is to love God and the second is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (Mk 12:30). Called the new commandments, these two actually summarize all ten of the Old Testament Commandments, which, in turn, really boil down to one: loving God. If we love our neighbor who is made in the image of God, we love God. To "love God and neighbor" then means to truly consider God first in all things—to ask, when we are confronted with a decision: "How does God want me to proceed?" or "How would Jesus respond in this situation?" In so doing, we would be trying to live a Christ-like life in all situations, which would include treating everyone we meet in our daily walk through life (our neighbor) as we would want them to treat us.

Loving everyone, however, does not mean giving in to them in all situations and at all costs—even to keep peace. Love means wanting the best (salvation) for everyone, and thus doing our best to put them and keep them on the road to God. Sometimes love has to be tough!

(b). God is love (1 Jn 4:8). He loves us all! In what sense, then, is He to be feared? (Read Jude 20-23.) To be indifferent to God is to have no awareness of the need for spiritual growth, which can lead to permanent estrangement from Him. To have faith that there is indeed a Creator, and to realize that He naturally expects a commitment from His people will produce fear in the mind of a rational person as to the consequences of following his own will rather than God's. This type of fear has the potential of developing into love. Scripture says that "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps 111:10), and that fear is the only way to reach some (Jude 23). According to the Philokalia:

If you have faith in the Lord you will fear punishment, and this fear will lead you to control the passions. Once you control the passions you will accept affliction patiently, and through such acceptance you will acquire hope in God. Hope in God separates the intellect from every worldly attachment, and when the intellect is detached in this way it will acquire love for God.

Fear of God is of two kinds. The first is generated in us by the threat of punishment. It is through such fear that we develop in due order self-control, patience, hope in God, and dispassion; and it is from dispassion that love comes. The second kind of fear is linked with love and constantly produces reverence in the soul, so that it does not grow indifferent to God because of the intimate communion of its love.

The first kind of fear is expelled by perfect love when the soul has acquired this and is no longer afraid of punishment (1 Jn 4:18). The second kind, as we have already said, is always found united with perfect love. The first kind of fear is referred to in the following two verses: *Out of fear of the Lord men shun evil* (Prov 16:6), and *Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (Ps 111:10). The second kind is mentioned in the following verses: *Fear of the Lord is pure, and endures forever* (Ps 19:9), and *Those who fear the Lord will not want for anything* (Ps 34:10). MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR⁶

(c). The word "love" is often used very loosely. How can Paul's definition of love be helpful to a couple attracted to each other? ...in any relationship? ...in our relationship with God? ...in interaction with our “enemy” (Mt 5:44)? A couple attracted to each other can use Paul's definition of love as a guide by which to evaluate their relationship. If they do not, and cannot, at least work toward treating each other in the manner indicated, perhaps what they feel for each other is not really love at all.

This definition can be used as a pattern for continual growth in any relationship, for a love that will never fade—but rather continue to bloom.

If we love God, we will use the gifts He has given us to do His work. We will not look for glory for ourselves but rather reflect it where it belongs—toward Him—knowing that if we do receive tribute from the world, we have received our reward and can expect none from Him (Mt 6:1-4). We will not give up when the work becomes too difficult or put our own comfort or pleasure first at all times. Our spiritual accomplishments will not engender arrogance, because we know that without Him we can do nothing. We will not envy those who seem to have an easier time or what we may consider a better role. We will be considerate, even when we are tired and hassled. We will not take offense easily, or blame God when something goes wrong in our lives.

Paul's definition of love calls for us to be kind to those with whom we interact, even if they are unkind to us, in keeping with Christ's instruction to love even our enemy. To the extent that we succeed, we may find that we lose an enemy and gain a friend!

To *rejoice in truth* is to love Christ's teachings, teach them to others, and try to live by them as best we can. But we rejoice especially when we remember that salvation through Jesus Christ does not depend on our perfection—only upon the fact that if we really have love-producing faith, we will keep trying to follow this pattern (Mt 5:48).

(d). Why will faith and hope no longer be necessary after the Second Coming of Christ? Why will love continue? The ultimate goal of the qualities of faith and hope that we strive for is eternal life with God. The Second Coming of Christ will bring Judgment of everyone. Those whose lives are judged to have demonstrated faith in and love for Jesus Christ will see their hopes realized (Mt 25:34-40). Faith will be replaced by perfect knowledge of God and His Kingdom and hope by promises fulfilled.

Love, however, is the stuff of which the Kingdom is made, so it will continue. Thus our daily goal should be to grow in love—to practice love—to be ready for and suitable residents of that perfect place. If we routinely try to just “do,” to the best of our ability, what is required by love, even when we don't feel like it, our capacity for love will increase accordingly. Love has no limits!

¹ Toal, Vol. 4, p.223.

² Colb Lubheid, trans., *John Cassian: Conferences*, p.286.

³ Schaff, “Homily XXXIV,” p.190.

⁴ *ibid*, “Homily XXXIV,” p.202.

⁵ *ibid*.

⁶ Palmer, etal, p.53, 62.