

I CHOOSE LOVE PART II | Paul's 15 Characteristics of Christian Love.

1. Love is patient. The Greek word (*makrothumein*) used in the New Testament always describes patience with *people* and not patience with circumstances. The fourth-century Church father John Chrysostom said that it is the word used of those who are wronged and who have it easily in their power to avenge themselves and yet who will not do it. It describes people who are slow to anger, and it is used of God himself in his relationship with men and women. In our dealings with others, however difficult and however unkind and hurting they are, we must exercise the same patience as God exercises with us. Such patience is not the sign of weakness but the sign of strength; it is not defeatism but rather the only way to victory. The American Baptist Harry Emerson Fosdick points out that no one treated the President, Abraham Lincoln, with more contempt than did his secretary for war, Edwin Stanton. He called him 'a low cunning clown', he nicknamed him 'the original gorilla' and said that the traveller and explorer Paul 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. Lincoln said nothing. He made Stanton his war minister because he was the best man for the job, and he treated him with every courtesy. The years wore on. The night came when the assassin's bullet murdered Lincoln in the theatre. In the little room to which the President's body was taken stood that same Stanton, and, looking down on Lincoln's silent face, he 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.

2. Love is kind. The third-century biblical scholar Origen

had it that this means that love is 'sweet to all'. Writing about a century later, Jerome spoke of what he called 'the benignity' of love. So much Christianity is good but unkind. There was no one more religious than Philip II of Spain, and yet he founded the Spanish Inquisition and thought he was serving God by massacring those who thought differently from him. The famous Cardinal Pole declared that murder and adultery could not compare in wickedness with heresy. Quite apart from that persecuting spirit, there is in so many good people an attitude of criticism. So many good church people would have sided with the rulers and not with Jesus if they had to deal with the woman taken in adultery.

3. Love knows no envy. It has been said that there are really only two classes of people in this world—'those who are millionaires and those who would like to be'. There are two kinds of envy. The one covets the possessions of other people; and such envy is very difficult to avoid, because it is a very human failing. The other is worse—it grudges the very fact that others should have what it has not; it does not so much want things for itself as wish that others had not got them. Meanness of soul can sink no further than that.

4. Love is no braggart. Love is not boastful. There is a self-effacing quality in love. True love will always be far more impressed with its own unworthiness than its own merit. In the writer J. M. Barrie's story, Sentimental Tommy used to come home to his mother after some success at school and say: 'Mother, am I no' a wonder?' Some people confer their love with the idea that they are conferring a favor. But people who really love cannot get over the wonder that they are loved. Love is kept humble by the consciousness that it can never offer its loved one a gift which is good enough.

5. Love is not inflated with its own importance. Napoleon always advocated the sanctity of the home and

the obligation of public worship—for others. Of himself, he said: 'I am not a man like other men. The laws of morality do not apply to me.' Really great people never think of their own importance. William Carey, who began life mending shoes as a cobbler, was one of the greatest missionaries and certainly one of the greatest linguists the world has ever seen. He translated some parts of the Bible into no fewer than thirty-four Indian languages. When he came to India, he was regarded with dislike and contempt. 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 shoemaker.' 'No, your lordship,' answered Carey, 'not a shoemaker, only a cobbler.' He did not even claim to make shoes—only to mend them. No one likes the 'important' person. It can be a sorry sight to see, as Shakespeare had it, 'man dressed in a little brief authority'.

6. Love does not behave gracelessly. It is a significant fact that in Greek the words for *grace* and for *charm* are the same. There is a kind of Christianity which takes a delight in being blunt and almost brutal. There is strength in it, but there is no grace or charm. Bishop J. B. Lightfoot of Durham said of Arthur F. Sim, one of his students: 'Let him go where he will, his face will be a sermon in itself.' There is a graciousness in Christian love which never forgets that courtesy and tact and politeness are lovely things.

7. Love does not insist upon its rights. In the last analysis, there are in this world only two kinds of people—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. It would be the key to almost all the problems which surround us today if people would think less of their rights and more of their duties. Whenever we start thinking about 'our place', we are drifting away from Christian love.

8. Love never flies into a temper. The real meaning of this is that Christian love never becomes exasperated with people. Exasperation is always a sign of defeat. When we lose our tempers, we lose everything. In his famous poem, 'If', Rudyard 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. Those who can control their tempers can overcome anything.

9. Love does not store up the memory of any wrong it has received. The word translated as *store up* (*logizesthai*) is an accountant's word. It is the word used for entering up an item in a ledger so that it will not be forgotten. That is precisely what so many people do. One of the great arts in life is to learn what to forget. Similarly, many people nurse their anger to keep it simmering; they brood over their wrongs until it is impossible to forget them. Christian love has learned the great lesson of forgetting.

10. Love finds no pleasure in evildoing. It might be better to translate this sentence as *love finds no pleasure in anything that is wrong*. It is not so much delight in doing the wrong thing that is meant, as the malicious pleasure which

comes to most of us when we hear something derogatory about someone else. It is one of the strange features of human nature that very often we prefer to hear of the misfortune of others rather than of their good fortune. It is much easier to weep with those who weep than to rejoice with those who rejoice. Christian love has none of that human malice which finds pleasure in hearing unpleasant things about other people.

11. Love rejoices with the truth. That is not as easy as it sounds. There are times when we definitely do not want the truth to prevail, and still more times when it is the last thing we wish to hear. Christian love has no wish to conceal the truth; it has nothing to hide and so is glad when the truth wins through.

12. Love can endure anything. It is just possible that this may mean 'love can cover anything', in the sense that it will never drag into the light of day the faults and mistakes of others. It would far rather set about quietly mending things than publicly displaying and rebuking them. More likely, it means that love can bear any insult, any injury, any disappointment. It describes the kind of love that was in the heart of Jesus himself. As Edward Denny's hymn has it:

Thy foes might hate, despise, revile,
Thy friends unfaithful prove;
Unwearied in forgiveness still,
Thy heart could only love.

13. Love is completely trusting.

This characteristic has a twofold aspect. (1) *In relation to God*, it means that love takes God at his word, and can take every promise which begins 'Whoever' and say: 'That means me.' (2) *In relation to our fellow men and women*, it means

that love always believes the best about other people. It is often true that we make people what we believe them to be. If we show that we do not trust people, we may make them untrustworthy. If we show people that we trust them absolutely, we may make them trustworthy. When Thomas Arnold became headmaster of Rugby School in 1828, he instituted a completely new way of doing things. Before he arrived, school had been a terror and a tyranny. Arnold called the boys together and told them that there was going to be much more liberty and much less flogging. 'You are free,' he said, 'but you are responsible—you are gentlemen. I intend to leave you much to yourselves, and put you upon your honour, because I believe that if you are guarded and watched and spied upon, you will grow up knowing only the fruits of servile fear; and when your liberty is finally given you, as it must be some day, you will not know how to use it.' The boys found it difficult to believe. When they were brought before him, they continued to make the old excuses and to tell the old lies. 'Boys,' he said, 'if you say so, it must be true—I believe your word.' The result was that there came a time in Rugby when boys said: 'It is a shame to tell Arnold a lie—he always believes you.' He believed in them, and he made them what he believed them to be. Love can make honorable even the dishonorable by believing the best.

14. Love never ceases to hope. Jesus believed that no one is beyond hope. The Methodist Adam Clarke was one of the great theologians, but at school he was very slow to learn. One day, a distinguished visitor paid a visit to the school, and the teacher singled out Adam Clarke and said: 'That is the stupidest boy in the school.' Before he left the school, the visitor came to the boy and said kindly: 'Never

mind, my boy, you may be a great scholar some day. Don't be discouraged but try hard, and keep on trying.' The teacher had no hope; but the visitor was hopeful, and—who knows?—it may well have been that word of hope which made Adam Clarke what he one day became.

15. Love bears everything with triumphant fortitude.

The verb used here (*hupomenein*) is one of the great Greek words. It is generally translated as *to bear* or *to endure*; but what it really describes is not the spirit which can passively bear things, but the spirit which, in bearing them, can conquer and change their very nature. The Scottish minister and hymn-writer George Matheson, who lost his sight and who was disappointed in love, wrote in one of his prayers that he might accept God's will 'Not with dumb resignation but with holy joy; not only with the absence of murmur but with a song of praise.' Love can bear things not merely with passive resignation, but with triumphant fortitude, because it knows that 'a father's hand will never cause his child a needless tear'.

One thing remains to be said: when we think of the qualities of this love as Paul portrays them, we can see them made real in the life of Jesus himself.¹

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