

XXIII.

The Greatest of These Is Love.

“The greatest of these is Love.” — *1 Cor. xiii. 13.*

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That the *shedding abroad of Love* and the glowing of its fire through the heart is the eternal work of the Holy Spirit, is stated by no one so pithily as by St. Paul in the closing verse of his hymn of Love. Faith, Hope, and Love are God’s most precious gifts; but Love far surpasses the others in preciousness. Compared with all heavenly gifts, Faith, Hope, and Love stand highest, but of these three *Love is the greatest*. All spiritual gifts are precious, and with holy jealousy the apostle covets them, especially the gift of prophesying; but, among the various paths of obtaining spiritual gifts, he knows a way still more excellent, viz., the royal road of Love.

We know that some deny us the right thus to interpret the thirteenth verse; but with little effect. To assert that in the heavenly life faith and hope, like Love, will abide forever, opposes the general teaching of the Scripture, and especially of St. Paul’s course of reasoning. In his Epistle to the Corinthians, he opposes faith to sight, saying, “We walk by faith, not by sight” (*2 Cor. v. 7*); wherefore he can not mean that after all faith shall continue when turned into sight. If faith is the evidence of things *not* seen, how can it continue when we shall see face to face? How is it possible to maintain that St. Paul represents faith as an eternal gift when in the twelfth verse he says, “Then we shall know even as we are known” (*1 Cor. xiii. 12*)? And he makes the same representation with reference to hope, “For we are saved by hope,” adding, “Hope which is seen is no hope, for what a man seeth why doth he yet hope for?” (*Rom. viii. 24*). Wherefore faith and hope can not be represented as abiding and enduring elements in our spiritual treasure. Neither faith nor hope belongs to the inheritance bequeathed to us by testament. They are springs of spiritual life and joy to us now, because we do not yet possess the inheritance; but when once the inheritance is ours, why should we still care for the will? As proof and earnest that the inheritance can not be lost, the will is very precious to us; but when the inheritance is delivered into our hands it is mere waste paper, and only the inheritance is of value.

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Even Drs. Beets and Van Oosterzee, altho they choose to walk in paths somewhat different from those of the fathers, fully concede this point, as their beautiful comments on the last verse of *2 Cor. xiii.* plainly show. Dr. Beets writes:

“Without apparent cause, at the end of a digression upon the excellency of love, the apostle mentions faith and hope before love. It is evident that, while thinking of the latter, he can not overlook the former. May we not infer from this that faith and hope are just as essential to the Christian as love? A Christian without love! It is indeed a contradiction of terms. The apostle says: ‘He that hath not love is nothing.’ How could he be a Christian? Ah, what deception, what hypocrisy, what horrible sin to disguise a life without love, a loveless heart under the Christian name! But what do you think of a Christian without hope? Is not this just as absurd and just as offensive? What! Life and immortality brought to light by Jesus Christ; He the Resurrection and the Life, having the words of eternal life; His Evangel the glad tidings of the forgiveness of sin, of reconciliation to God, of an opened heaven of bliss; and still it is thought possible that amid present suffering and sorrow a Christian can live without the delightful prospect and expectation of such a glorious future! Without hope! Is this not a fatal feature in the apostle’s sad picture of the blind heathen? Is it not the same as to be without Christ? without God? Surely without Christ no man can know this hope, and no one who knows Christ can be without it:

“And again, can one be a Christian without faith in God, who ‘so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life’? without faith in Christ who has said, ‘Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in Me’? without faith in that faithful and true word of the divine promise which centers in the fact that Jesus Christ has come into the world to save sinners? a Christian without faith—I do not say power of faith by which he can remove mountains, but without faith which is the evidence of things not seen? Reader, if perhaps you are such a Christian, what is your Christianity? What profit is it to you? With what right, with what conscience, with what purpose do you persist in claiming the name of a Christian? A Christian without faith is one without hope; and as such he is a mortal, a sinner without comfort in life and death.

“Perhaps some one will answer: ‘Even as such my Christianity may be a great deal to me, and serve me the highest and best purpose, if it only cause me to go on to love. Even tho I had faith so that I could move mountains, and had not love, I would be nothing. Only through love one is something, is much, is all. Having, love, I have enough; and having Love, I can not be altogether without hope. These three being equally indispensable, they are equally inseparable from the Christian. No Christian without faith, without

hope, without love. No Christian hope nor Christian love without Christian faith. And, on the other hand, no Christian faith without Christian hope; nor Christian faith without Christian love. Faith, Hope, Love, these three originate the one in the other; sustain each other; these three are one. They become one more and more; they strengthen, purify, regenerate each other. Love is not first, nor hope, but faith. However, faith is impossible, even for a moment, without hope and love.

“But among these three, that are indispensable to the Christian and absolutely so to each other, love is the greatest and most excellent of all:

“First, because of its importance to the *Christian*. Faith is the inward salvation, and hope the new-born happiness of a fallen man; but love is the growing perfection of restored man.

“Second, because of its *relation to God*. Of faith and hope God is the Object and Example. To believe in God is to cast oneself in the arms of God; to hope is to rest upon His heart; but, to love is to bear His image. His own Being is Love. To love is divine. God is Love, and he that abideth in love abideth in Him and He in him.

“Third, love is greatest by *its working*. Of the deeply rooted tree of faith, it is the fruit which glorifies God and the shadow which diffuses a blessing. By love all that believe are one; by it they strengthen, serve, and bear each other. ‘Love edifieth.’ It builds up the Body of the Lord; it spreads His Church among a sinful race, and carries on the labor of His love. For love’s sake His Church, His Cross, His Person find grace and honor in the sight of unbelievers. It shames unbelief and silences mockery.

“Fourth, love is greatest by reason of *its endurance*; Love never faileth. When time is merged in eternity, prophecy shall be silent. When the redeemed of all nations shall join in the song of the Lamb, tongues shall cease; and knowledge which is in part shall vanish away when that which is perfect is come. And when all is sight there shall be no more room for faith; and where shall hope be when all shall be fulfilled?

“Lastly, love *never faileth*. When this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality; when it shall be revealed to us what we shall be; when bowed down in adoration we shall see Him as He is, in whom, tho not seeing Him, yet believing, we rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory, then shall our whole being, all our faith and hope, be only love. Then love, purified of her last stain and having attained to her highest truth, shall forever be in us the inexhaustible source of happiness and inexhaustible power of God glorifying activity. Only then shall we realize perfectly, that is forever, what it means to love, and also how little they have known of love who, denying the love of God in Christ, counted the exercise of holy love consistent with the persevering in blasphemous unbelief.”



And Dr. Van Oosterzee has written with no less animation:

“They are noble companions even when we consider each by herself: Faith, not merely a certain confidence of the soul in the reality of things invisible, and in the certainty of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus, but that saving faith which builds upon the Person and work of the Redeemer; which enters into closest communion with Him; Hope of the perfect fulfilment of all the promises of God which are yea and amen in Christ Jesus; and Love which unites the believer, not only with God and Christ, but with all his brethren and sisters in the Lord, and with the whole race which in heaven and earth is named after God.

“Lovely picture: at the right, Faith embracing the saving Cross; at the left, Hope leaning upon the infallible anchor; and in the midst, Love holding in her hand the burning heart, her daily sacrifice consecrated to the God of Love. And yet, altho in representation they may be separated, in reality they can not be, being companions inseparable, not only from every Christian, but also from one another. For what is faith, without hope and love? A cold conviction of the understanding, but without quickening power in heart, and without ripened fruit in life. Without hope, faith could not once see heaven; but even if it could enter heaven without love, it would lose its highest felicity. And what is hope, without faith and love? At the most a vain delusion, followed by a painful awakening; a fragrant blossom soon to wither without once bearing fruit. And finally, what is love without hope and faith? Perhaps the welling up of the natural feeling; but by no means a spiritual, vital principle. If love does not believe, it must die; and if it does not hope as well as love, it must be a source of measureless suffering.

“To separate one of these three sisters from the others is to write the death-sentence of the one, and to destroy the beauty of the others. Inseparably united, however, they deserve to be called companions in the fullest sense of the word. Faith is much, hope is more, and love is most. Faith unites us with God; hope lifts us up to God; but love makes us conformable to God, for God is Love. Faith is the child of humility, hope the offspring of persecution, but love the fruit of faith and hope together. By faith and hope we do in a certain sense seek ourselves; love alone makes us forget ourselves, working for the salvation of others. Faith kneels down in the closet, and hope, in holy ecstasy, sees the heavens opened; but love sends us thence back into the world to impart the treasure of comfort there received to others. Yea, of love, not of faith and hope, can it be said, that it never faileth. Faith is turned into sight and hope into enjoyment, for what a man seeth why doth he yet hope for? But even before the throne of God, love remains as young as when for

the first time it was born in the heart. Even there the bond of perfection is at once the condition and the pledge of an infinite increase in holiness and blessedness; and, therefore, it is the greatest forever, both here and there, even tho its name has merely third place. To the Christian here these three are constant companions; whatever may change and vanish away, they can abide, for they are the unchangeable mark of every believer. They must abide, or our entire Christianity becomes a form without life. They will abide, for they are so sublimely divine and so truly human. Faith may have to wrestle with darkness, hope with doubt, love with resistance; but where Christ truly lives in the heart, they must abide forever.”

There are, of course, expressions in these passages for which these two divines alone are responsible; we mean to show only that these two men have strongly felt that Love’s superiority of place and quality is principally conspicuous from the fact that, while faith and hope will finally cease, Love abides forever.

Surely, faith and hope do not cease in the sense that other spiritual gifts cease. The word “temporal” has a twofold meaning. Temporal is the worm that dies and from which nothing remains. Temporal is the caterpillar that must die as a worm, but that rises beautiful again as a butterfly. The same is true of faith and hope, as compared with the spiritual gifts of speaking with tongues and healing the sick. The latter will fail altogether. They will completely disappear. They will vanish away, as St. Paul says in [1 Cor. xiii. 8](#). But the failing of faith and hope may not be taken in that sense. They fail only to rise again in the fuller, richer, and more beautiful form of sight and enjoyment.

But Love does not know this metamorphosis. It not only abides forever, but it ever abides *unchanged*. In the fact that all other gifts perish or change, and that Love alone is eternal, we see the never-ending work of the Holy Spirit scintillating in the hearts of believers; in our meditation on Love we apprehend His proper work in all its depths, even to the root.

XXIV.

Love in the Blessed Ones.

“That God may be all in all.”— *1 Cor. xv. 28.*



Sanctification and the shedding abroad of love are not the same. Before the fall Adam could not have been the subject of a single act of sanctification, for he was holy; but Love could have been shed abroad in his heart ever more richly, fully, and abundantly. And this would have been the work of the Holy Spirit.

The unholy alone need sanctification; but to suppose that Love is exhausted in the victory over selfishness is a great mistake. Of course, selfishness is utterly inconsistent with Love; but Love is not the mere *absence* of selfishness, as in Adam; nor its *rebuke* and blood-bought *victory* in the saint; in fact, Love begins to unfold and develop only after the last traces of selfishness are wholly effaced.

The same is true of health, which is not merely the throwing off of disease and its subtle poison; for then convalescents alone could be called healthy, and real healthful life and the life of health would be out of the question. On the contrary, health exists independent of sickness, antedates it, and drives it out when it invades the system; for this is one of its essential operations. And after its fight with sickness it goes on more richly and exuberantly, as tho there had been no sickness at all, developing powers and offering enjoyments that are ever new and glorious. So does Love antedate selfishness. And when selfishness appeared, Love immediately prepared to drive it out. And having succeeded, its work was not ended, but as tho nothing had happened it continued its life of Love.

Victory over an invading enemy does not end the national existence, but the nation's development and prosperity quietly and gratefully continue. Satan invaded Paradise, Love's dwelling-place, and with all his evil powers of selfishness opposed Love. Then Love had to fight, not because it was in its nature, but in self-defense. Indeed, it may not cease to fight until all selfishness is under perfect control. And when Love's rule is safe, Love does not recline in everlasting slumber, but with strong impulse and holy animation continues the unfolding of its holy and restful life.



This fight is not fought in every heart separately. The fact that Satan is the author and inspirer of all selfishness proves the mutual relation of selfishness in every heart. To some extent even selfishness is organized. Hence victory over individual selfishness does not avail so long as selfishness continues in others. The selfishness of one will necessarily affect the other, and Love can not celebrate its triumph.

It is true, in death God cuts off all sin from our hearts; and so far as we are concerned selfishness is cast out. He who awakes in eternity with selfishness in his heart is on the way to hell. But altho God in death graciously draws the last threads of selfishness from the hearts