Quality Friendship - The Risks and Rewards

- An Excerpt -

A More Excellent Way

I spent my high school years in a school named in honour of the great British bulldog, Sir Winston Churchill. Perhaps it was partly for that reason that I have always been fascinated by the life and career of the man who rallied his country from the brink of defeat in World War II. We remember and respect him as one of the greatest figures in our century because of his brilliant career as the war leader, and we tend to lose sight of the long years before that, which he had spent in the political wilderness. To say the least, his career was tumultuous, and he was at times the most scorned and despised man in British politics. Yet it was to Churchill that a desperate nation looked in its most crucial hour, and his courage revived the roar of the British lion.

For the last twenty years of his life, Churchill's personal physician was Sir Charles Wilson, later to become Lord Moran. From his unique perspective, Moran saw Churchill as few others did, and that gives his memoirs a special value. His last chapter seeks to probe beneath the facts of Churchill's life by asking the question, "What is the ultimate secret of Winston Churchill's mastery over men?" Having discussed and discarded several factors he zeroes in on the factor that set Churchill apart:

How came it that this man who, in the time of peace, had been an isolated figure, trusted by no party, was, broadly speaking, allowed in the war to do as he pleased? In Smut's words, he was the one indispensable man! There was in him something that was not to be found in other men. He was not, I think, a sage. He does not seem to have been a soldier of genius. He was not, perhaps, a born administrator. There is left only an extraordinary concentration on one purpose... it amounted to obsession... on victory whatever it might cost. It was that single-mindedness which gave him his incomparable power during the war. It is, according to William James, the essential factor in greatness, for the man of genius differs from ordinary men, not in any innate quality of the brain, but in the aims and purposes on which he concentrates, and in the degree of concentration he manages to achieve.

In Moran's view, what made Churchill unique was that great sense of purpose and his unswerving commitment to achieving it. That ability to cut through the fog, to perceive the priority, and to keep it constantly in view produces success in almost every area of life. And it is a concept that is unavoidable in the believer's life as well. If we desire to bring glory to the Lord Jesus Christ, we must know what is essential and what is peripheral. In the words of D. L. Moody, "Give me a man who says, 'This one thing I do,' and not, 'These one hundred things I dabble with."

But what is that one indispensable thing upon which we should single-mindedly concentrate our attention and our actions? What is the greatest need of the church? A poll would undoubtedly reveal a multitude of answers: consistent Bible teaching, a new vision for evangelism and missions, more social concern, more intellectual excellence, and so on. All of those are important,
indeed essential, but I am reminded of the insight I received from a godly old saint, when I was only a teenager. "Gary, I have learned that my biggest problem is not distinguishing between what is good and what is bad. It is seeing the difference between what is good, what is better, and what is best."

Every disciple is committed to giving his life, not just to what is good, but to what is best. In 1 Corinthians 13, the Holy Spirit directs us to "the way of excellence." Few passages are more familiar to believers than the great hymn of love, yet it is usually only superficially understood and even more superficially applied to our lives. Up until now, we have been focusing our attention specifically on the subject of friendship. For the next few chapters, we want to expand our horizons and study carefully what 1. Corinthians 13 tells us about love.

We noticed in the very first chapter that in John 15:13, the Lord Jesus connects friendship and love: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." The Lord is clearly indicating that quality friendship is built upon a very special quality of love, the love that He modelled by His death upon the cross and that is the theme of 1. Corinthians 13. Our goal will be to study Paul's great hymn of love so that we can understand more clearly the unique nature of biblical friendship.

The truths of 1. Corinthians 13 burst the bounds of those special relationships we call friendships, however, and demand to be applied to every relationship of life. Therefore, in the following chapters, our focus will not be so much upon the superstructure of friendship as upon the foundation of all our relationships, love. It is as God establishes His love within us that it will spill over to our friends around us. A careful study of 1. Corinthians 13 will enhance our understanding of God's way of friendship.

One of the major mistakes we make in reading 1. Corinthians 13 is to read it as if it stood alone, as a separate work of literature. But Paul did not compose it as a literary masterpiece (which it undeniably is), but as part of a letter to a group of Christians who were wrestling with some difficult problems in their personal relationships. When we isolate this chapter from its context in Paul's letter and see it as an independent unit, we subtly distort its message by removing it from its true home in the harsh reality and rough-and-tumble of daily life. We place it into the carefully controlled environment of the theoretical and the sanctimonious.

1. Corinthians 13 is not so much a hymn as it is a battle order, and we will see that more clearly if we see how Paul's description of love fits into his discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter 12. Throughout that chapter, Paul taught the confused Corinthians that spiritual gifts are the Lord's good provision for His Body, the church. But there is a better - in fact a best - way, the way of love, and a study of the last few verses of chapter 12 reveals the flow of this thought (See 1.COR 12:27-1.COR 13:3).

The Greeks had a Word for It

What do we mean by 'love'? Few words are used to convey such a wide variety of ideas, from the profound to the trivial to the depraved. We use it to describe everything from a momentary uncontrollable surge of lust, to an appreciation for a new car, to a life of heroic self-sacrifice. So we are forced to think carefully about what the New Testament means when it speaks of love, and in particular, about what it means when it uses the word 'agape' to describe the love that is to characterise our lives.

The Greek language has a variety of words to express the concept of love. One of the most common is the word 'eros', from which we derive the word 'erotic'. Eros is the love of pleasure, the love of what pleases me. Aristotle said that eros begins with the eye, and it was therefore the feeling associated with our desires and passions. "I love tennis." "I love ice cream." "I love your body (and sexually desire you)." That is 'eros' love, the love that intoxicates and sweeps us along on a tidal wave of emotion and impulse. Eros is the love that desires for itself, that loves for what it
can get from the other. It is a love built on externals, captured nicely in this profound piece of poetry:

John's girl is rich and haughty,  
my girl is poor as clay.  
John's girl is young and pretty,  
mine looks like a bale of hay.  
John's girl is smart and clever,  
my girl is dumb but good.  
But would I trade my girl for John's girl?  
You bet your life I would.

A second kind of love the Greeks describe is the word 'storge'. The word does not occur in precisely that form in the New Testament, but it primarily expresses family love, the love built on family relationships. Thus Plato wrote, "A child loves (storge) and is loved by those who begat him."

A third word is more common and more important. 'Philia' describes the love of attraction. It goes far deeper than eros because it is the warm love of affection and friendship. Aristotle describes it in these terms: "The lover's pleasure is in gazing at his beloved, the loved one's pleasure is in receiving the attentions of her lover, but when the loved one's beauty fades, the 'philia' sometimes fades too, as the lover no longer finds pleasure in the sight of his beloved, and the loved one receives no attention from the lover."

This is the emotion we most often describe with the word love, and is the attitude that is usually said to be the basis of a good marriage or friendship. 'Philia' is significant and even exciting, but it is ultimately inadequate as a solid foundation for relationships, because when the attraction ends for whatever reason, the relationship either ends or grows sterile. It is the lack of 'philia' that eventually fills sour divorce courts or produces fragile friendships and brittle marriages. Thus, whereas the New Testament often uses this word in a positive way, it more often uses a deeper and richer word for love.

The most common New Testament word for love is 'agape'. That is actually rather surprising, because in secular Greek 'agape' was a rather drab and insignificant word, not often used. When it did occur, it described a respect and sympathy between equals, or perhaps a feeling of contentment or desire, and sometimes simply an affectionate greeting. Outside of Christ, there is nothing very profound about 'agape'. But when the translators of the Old Testament into Greek sought a word to describe the love of God, they chose 'agape' to emphasise its unique quality.

God's love for us is not based on pleasure or passion (eros), natural relationship (storge), or natural attraction (philia). God's love is based on God's own character, and so they chose the neutral word 'agape' and filled it with the content of God's love. That is the word the New Testament uses most often to speak of love, because it points us to the supernatural love that originates in the heart of God. It is 'agape' that defines biblical friendship - a quality friendship made incarnate in the Lord Jesus.

What is this Thing Called Love?

Often we are given the impression that 1. Corinthians 13 is God's definition of 'agape'. But that is misleading. As we shall see, it does give us a beautiful description of love in action, but we will have to look elsewhere for a definition. Paul here tells us what love does, rather than what it is. Love is always defined in terms of the cross, as is clearly seen in 1. John 4:9-10. To grapple with that definition is to forever destroy any concept of love as mere tolerance, empty sentimentalism, or idealistic romanticism. God's love is a tough love, a love that gives and bleeds. "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we
might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

Five things stand out:

1. The source of ‘agape’ is not the character of the loved or even his need, but rather the nature of the lover. God loves us because of what He is, not because of what we are.

2. The quality is that it is unconditional. It is not bestowed upon the worthy, but the unworthy. It is not inspired by merit, but by need. Our God loves sinners.

3. The goal of love is the good of the loved one. ‘Agape’ seeks the highest good of the other, whatever the cost. For the Father, the cost was the awesome cost of His Son, it was the price of being made sin for us. He died so "that we might live through Him."

4. The evidence of love is action. ‘Agape’ does not simply feel or speak. It acts. God so loved the world like this: He gave His one and only Son, John 3:16 tells us. Love therefore is not emotion-centred, but will-centred. ‘Agape’ chooses to act in the best interests of another.

5. The extent of love is sacrifice. "(He) sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Without sacrifice, there is no love, for by its very nature, love is outpouring, not self-seeking. Love does not act when it is convenient; it acts although it is costly.

Learning to Love

The apostle Paul has driven home the truth of the priority of love. Not even the most astonishing demonstrations of spiritual gifts can take its place. Without love, I accomplish nothing of value, I am nothing of value, I receive nothing of value. It is a truth that drives me to my knees. How much of what I do is motivated by love? How many of my relationships are grounded on ‘agape’? How many of my activities will endure because they are founded on love?

But we do not learn to love by bemoaning our lack of love. "We love him, because he first loved us." (1.JN 4:19). We learn to love, because we go to the source of love and spend time worshipping Him and learning from Him. If we do not worship well, we will never love well.

Such worship flows into obedience. To love is to act not on the basis of our feelings, but on the basis of the teaching of the Holy Spirit in the Word of God. It was the experience of building his life on the teaching of God’s Word that revolutionised the life of D. L. Moody, when the Lord made him aware of this area of need in his life: "I took up that word, love, and I do not know how many weeks I spent in studying the passages in which it occurs till at last I could not help loving people. I had been feeding on love so long I was anxious to do everybody good I came in contact with."

"I got full of it. It ran out of my fingers. You take up the subject of love in the Bible! You will get so full of it that all you have to do is open your lips, and a flood of the love of God flows out."

Perhaps that is why Mr. Moody suggested that every Christian worker read 1. Corinthians 13 once a week. Christian workers are not the only ones who need such a challenge! "The one great need in our Christian life is love, more love to God and to each other. Would that we could all move into that Love chapter and live there."

Unfortunately, our English versions find it hard to translate Paul’s description precisely. In the Greek text, each of the fifteen descriptions of love are verbs, not adjectives. That is not an insignificant detail, but a deliberate reminder that love is never passive or static. Love is always acting, always moving, and in the following translation, I have tried to capture that aspect of the text (See 1.COR 13:4-7).
Perhaps you have heard the suggestion that when you read these verses, you should substitute the name of the Lord Jesus for the word 'love': "Jesus Christ suffers long and acts kindly..." If that helps us realise more clearly the quality of our Lord's love for us, it is entirely appropriate. But it is also potentially dangerous, because 1. Corinthians 13 is not meant to describe what the Lord does, but what I am to do. It may be a beautiful portrait of our Lord, but I am to read it as a challenge to my life.

I suggest that you put your name in the hymn and see how it fits. If you are like me, it is a biting indictment. "Gary Inrig suffers long and..." Ouch! Far more than I care to admit, I do not act in love. If that is what love does, I am driven to confess that I am an unloving person. So I learn to read 1. Corinthians 13 on my knees, asking the Lord to produce His character in me, through His indwelling Holy Spirit. When I examine my actions toward my friends by asking myself, with the help of this description, whether this is the pattern of my relationships, I begin to realise how much more I need to learn about biblical friendship.

The list of the fifteen actions of love falls into three sections. The apostle begins by giving us the two basic attitudes of love, that it suffers long and acts kindly. He then elaborates on those qualities by suggesting eight things that love does not do and then concludes with five positive activities of love. Since love is such a significant part of our lives, we will work our way through those descriptions carefully, so that we can come away with a clear perception of what it means to live a life of love to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Basic Attitudes of Love

Our greatest error in understanding love is that we see it primarily as a feeling, an emotion. But emotions change and feelings fluctuate. In fact, what we call "love" or "romance" is often little more than infatuation or sexual attraction. When the feelings are gone or grow cold, so is the basis of the relationship. Therefore, the marriage divides or the friendship dissolves. Now, it is impossible and undesirable to separate love and feelings, but God's love is not primarily a matter of the emotions, but of the will. Therefore, when God begins His description of love in action, He begins with two characteristics that few of us would put first: "Love suffers long and acts kindly." That is hardly the stuff of which romantic songs are made! But the Holy Spirit wants from the start to structure our concept of love by teaching us the basic attitudes upon which 'agape' love is built.

The Longsuffering of Love

"Love is patient," most of our translations read, but a more literal translation captures better the active nature of this characteristic: "love suffers long." The Greek word, 'makrothumeo', literally means "to have a long temper." It may be a symptom of our character that we speak about people who are "short-tempered," or who have a "short fuse," but the English word that describes someone with a long temper or a long fuse, "long-animity," has fallen into disuse. We could be very literal and say that 'makrothumeo' describes someone who takes a long time to get "hot". Love takes a long time to reach its boiling point.

There is another word closely related to long-suffering; it is the word endure found in verse 7. The description of love is sandwiched between these two attributes: "love suffers long... it always endures." Close as they are in meaning, there is an important distinction between them. We endure circumstances, but we suffer long with people. Endurance enables us to cope with difficulties, but patience copes with people. So the very first characteristic of love describes an attitude that keeps on suffering the people-problems of life. There is a God-given persistence about all true love that comes from God Himself, who is long-suffering in His love.

There are two ideas bound up with the concept of love's long-suffering. First of all, it describes a refusal to seek revenge. To say that love is patient means that it refuses to try to get back at one
who has done it wrong. The Greeks had another word, ‘megalopsyche’, which literally means "to be big souled." But while they valued a person who was "big-souled," they looked down on someone who was "long-tempered." Why? Because as Aristotle said, a person with 'megalopsyche' was a person who would not tolerate any injury to himself. He always got back more than he had received. The Greeks gloried in a man who took revenge and got even. And a glance at our modern bookstalls, with titles such as 'Looking Out for Number One', 'Winning Through Intimidation' and 'Creative Aggression', tell us that ancient Greek values thrive today. We place little value on the quality of being long-tempered.

But God's Word values what the world despises. For the Christian, the big man is not the man who gets revenge but the believer who refuses to seek revenge and who keeps on ministering to people, even when they hurt or fail him. And it is no accident that that is where God's description of love begins, because love does not live in an ivory tower. It lives in a sinful world where friends fail, hurt, and disappoint, but still it refuses to retaliate or give up. The concept of long-suffering is the word the Lord Jesus used in Matthew 18:26 to describe the character of God the Father, Who has patience by refusing to require payment and forgiving our debt.

A second aspect of the long-suffering of love is that it refuses to give up on people. The ancient Greek writer Strabo used 'makrothumeo' to describe a city under siege that completely refused to give in, despite the circumstances. They refused to acknowledge defeat, no matter how inevitable it seemed, and they kept on working and battling for victory. That is how love suffers long with people. A lover is an optimist because he believes in God's capacity to change hearts, and he is a realist who keeps on reaching out, trusting God for a breakthrough.

It is so easy to give up on people, to "write them off!" But the love of the Lord Jesus toward me is incredibly persistent. I fail and fall and sin, yet He keeps on wrapping His arms of love around me and drawing me to Himself. Because He loves me like that, I am to love others like that, with a self-giving, long-suffering, persevering love. The first great quality of love is that it suffers long. It does not give up on people, and it does not seek revenge. There is a cost to that. After all, suffering hurts. It is not what we would choose. But love suffers and suffers long, because it longs to serve.

The Kindness of Love

The second basic quality of love is more positive in nature. "Love is kind," or more accurately, "love acts kindly." Love has the hide of a rhinoceros and the heart of a mother. It is very helpful to realise that the root word for 'kind' means 'useful'. I am kind to someone not when I am gentle, sweet, and inoffensive, but when my actions toward him are useful, because they meet a need in his life. At times, 'kind' love is very tough love, since it may require confrontation or discipline. A kind act, a useful act, may involve confronting a friend openly and honestly about problem areas in his life just as it may mean graciously responding to calls for help or showing sensitive consideration. And to act kindly means to act without harshness or hardness. The word is used in Luke 5:39 to describe wine that is superior because it has been mellowed by age. Maturity has removed its bite. Therefore, to say that love is kind is to say that love acts in a way that is useful to meet needs, with a goodness and mellowness born of maturity. There is a Spirit-given tenderness about 'agape', embodied in the gentle compassion of our Lord.

It is important that, by God's grace, we cultivate the quality of kindness. It is sadly true that often those evangelicals who value doctrinal orthodoxy most highly become rigid and harsh in their dealings with people. "Lord, make the bad people good and the good people nice," a little girl prayed, obviously reflecting on what she had seen in too many lives. We are told that the godly George Mueller prayed constantly, "Lord, keep me from becoming a cranky old Christian." If my faith in the Lord Jesus does not make me kind to my children, to my wife, to my friend; if my life does not have both the toughness and the softness of the Lord Jesus, then it is not love at all.
But where does the capacity for acting kindly come from? The answer is given in Luke 6:35, which directs us to the character of our God: "But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil." God's kindness is part of His grace, bestowed upon undeserving sinners. He is not kind to those who deserve kindness, but to people such as us who are in rebellion. Kindness is not treating people on the basis of merit and justice but on the basis of God's grace. Love acts kindly, because love is the grace of our Lord Jesus flowing over into our relationships with people.

In Galatians 5:22-23, we are told that the fruit of the Spirit is "love, joy, peace, patience (or long-suffering), kindness..." Longsuffering and kindness, the basic attitudes of love, are not the natural products of self-effort but the overflow of the Holy Spirit in my life. As I live a grace-centred life, walking in the Spirit, His love will increasingly become a characteristic of my life.

**Love's Attitude Towards Others**

Longsuffering and kindness are the basic foundation blocks upon which Paul builds his description of love. In a sense, the following eight statements of what love does not do are an explanation of what it means that love suffers long. The first four of those probe very deeply into our attitudes toward people. Our attitudes inevitably shape our actions, and how we see ourselves in relationship to others will determine whether or not we act in a loving way toward them.

**Love Does Not Envy**

John was the delight of his parents' hearts. They had seen him grow into a young man of great potential, with a deep desire to do the will of God. It was their constant prayer that he find the right girl, who would be the kind of wife who would enable John to be even more of God's man. When Carol came into his life, she seemed to be the answer to their prayers, a beautiful girl who professed to be a Christian. But as time went on, their anxiety grew. It became apparent that Carol's spiritual values were very shallow, and her main goal was to get John for herself. After all, she loved him and intended to have him, and she would achieve her goal by whatever means it took, whether that was sexual seduction or turning John against his parents. Suddenly the parents realised that they were in a battle for their son, and neither they nor Carol intended to lose.

There are two kinds of jealousy, and it is important that we learn to distinguish them when we read "love does not envy" or "love is not jealous." John's parents were jealous for their son, but Carol was jealous of him for herself. Their jealousy wanted what was best for him, Carol's what was best for her. The word translated 'jealousy' or 'envy' is the word from which we get the word 'zeal', and it describes both a proper zeal and a sinful jealousy.

In the Song of Solomon, we read a magnificent description of love:

> Set me as a seal upon thine heart,  
> As a seal upon thine arm:  
> For love is strong as death;  
> Jealousy is cruel as the grave:  
> The coals thereof are coals of fire,  
> Which hath a most vehement flame.  
> Many waters cannot quench love,  
> Neither can the floods drown it.

Song of Solomon 8:6-7
The true jealousy of love is not motivated by selfishness but by a deep desire for what is legitimately ours, to care for them and protect them. It is a jealous concern for another's well-being and happiness, that protects him both from the attacks of others and actions of self-destruction. No mother who truly loves her children allows them to play on a busy street or to experiment with poisons. No true friend can stand back with indifference while his friend pursues a course of self-destruction. No husband who truly loves his wife can say, "I don't care how many others she has affairs with. I can share her."

A few years ago, a book was written by a couple advocating such an "open marriage" concept. It was a major commercial success, praised for its progressive open-mindedness and its "mature, sophisticated" view of love. But the concept did not work. One counsellor claimed that every couple he knew who tried the open-marriage route broke up. It almost ended the authors' marriage, and the wife's next book pleaded for the recognition that sexual fidelity is not a traditional relic but a built-in need if there is to be emotional security. True love is not manifested by indifference, but by a mature possessiveness, and intense concern for the one we love.

It is in that sense that Scripture reminds us that our God is a jealous God (Ex 34:14). He has a lover's jealousy for us, a zeal to protect us, to provide for us, to produce the best for us. It is a love so strong and so zealous that even the price of death was not too great to pay. There is no selfishness or suspicion in His love, but only a concern that our lives be all they could be. He is jealous for our affections lest we be drawn away by the cheap substitutes Satan offers (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). He is never indifferent to anything that enters my life. There is a sense in which love is jealous and is only genuine as long as it is jealous, zealously longing for the very best for the person loved.

But when Paul tells us that "love does not envy," he is speaking about a very different kind of jealousy or envy. Strictly speaking, jealousy and envy are distinct concepts. Jealousy is the closed-hand disease ("what's mine is mine, and you can't have it"). Envy is the grasping-hand disease ("what's yours is desirable, and I want it"). Jealousy is possessive in a selfish way, refusing to share friends or possessions. It longs to hug things to itself; it is the insecurity of a Saul toward a David. Envy, on the other hand, is Shakespeare's "green sickness", the anxious desire for what belongs to another, whether it is possessions, friends, or talents. Both of them are intensely competitive, always measuring one's own worth by evaluating others.

The lovelessness of such envy and jealousy is obvious. By its very nature, love is self-giving, not grasping or hoarding. Envy keeps us from appreciating others for what they are, and jealousy keeps us from helping them to become what we are by God's grace. Rather than accepting others and meeting their needs, envy locks itself in competition with them all, and if not carefully guarded, it will destroy them. "Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before envy?" (Proverbs 27:4). The root error behind jealousy is the belief that my worth is established by my gifts or my possessions. A root of bitterness grows as envy and jealousy flourish. But love does not envy; love appreciates. Love is not jealous; love thanks God for the ability to give. Love accepts the grace of God, cultivating the qualities of godly contentment and genuine appreciation.

Love Does Not Boast

At first glance, the relation between lovelessness and boasting may be less than apparent. There is a sense in which this attitude is the flip side of envy and jealousy. Whereas those attitudes share a common desire to possess for oneself, it is not uncommon for a boaster to be a free spender and a giver. Yet behind the boasting is a selfishness that proclaims one's own importance. But love does not proclaim what I have. Love does not brag.

Love is not anxiously calling attention to itself in a desire for praise and applause. And boastfulness is not always expressed in words. There are hundreds of less obvious ways to proclaim our success - the bigger home, the flashier car, the attention-getting dress, the casual name-dropping - behind it all is an anxiety that others see our significance. In the words of the television commercials, "If you've got it, flaunt it." "If you've got it, you know it, if you've got it, you show it."
There is something humorous in boasting, suggestive of the young woman who went to her priest to confess the sin of vanity. Asked for an explanation, the girl said that every time she looked into the mirror, she could not help but think how beautiful she was. Drawing back the little curtain, the priest looked at her and finally said, "Don't worry, my dear. That isn't sin; it's just a mistake." So often boasting is an expression of insecurity rather than success. It is a reminder that the desire to impress others reflects a very fragile self-image.

One psychologist who endured the Nazi death camps in World War II has observed that those who died or disintegrated most quickly under that terrible pressure were those whose lives were built on external position and achievement. In a context where their activities had no meaning and their boasting made no sense, life itself soon lost any significance.

The lovelessness of boasting is that it is, in fact, a judgment upon others. A person who says, "I am handsome," is in fact saying, "I'm more handsome than so and so." A person who reminds us of his success is claiming to be more successful than we are. My boasting is therefore a way of elevating myself by implicitly denigrating others. Behind the action of boasting is an attitude of self-centredness and criticism, which is the opposite of love.

There is a story told of a well-known Christian businessman who was visiting a church and, as a matter of courtesy, was asked to bring a word of greeting. Unfortunately, he got rather carried away in the process and went on to tell the congregation about all the wonderful things he had done for the Lord. "I have a large house, a fine family, a successful business, and a good reputation. I have enough money to do whatever I want, and I am able to support some Christian ministries very generously, and many organisations want me to be a director. I have health and almost unlimited opportunities. Most people would love to change places with me. What more could God give me?" As he paused for effect, a voice shouted from the back of the auditorium, "How about a good dose of humility?" And, according to 1. Corinthians, a good dose of love, since "love does not brag."

**Love Is Not Arrogant**

The last phrase in verse 4 points us to an attitude more subtle than that shown by boasting. Boasting is the outward expression of a pride mixed with insecurity, but arrogance is a far more destructive inner attitude. The word Paul uses is a picturesque one, meaning "to be puffed up", "to be blown up." It vividly depicts that self-inflated sense of importance that makes us feel very significant in our own eyes.

Arrogance was a very common attitude in Corinth. They were a group of people swollen with pride because of their party spirit (4:6) and their self-assured feelings of their own maturity (4:18-21). Others were full of pride because of their ability to tolerate sin (5:1-2), while still others were filled with an arrogant confidence in their religious knowledge (8:1). In Colossae, another group of Christians were full of arrogance over their legalism (COL 2:18). All of that is eloquent testimony that we can become arrogant about anything, even "spiritual things", and that our arrogance usually has little relationship to reality. Every occurrence of arrogance in Corinth was, in fact, an area of sin, not success; but those people had become so turned in on themselves that they had lost contact with reality. They had become blind to their true condition.

An attitude of arrogance looks down on other people and manifests itself in a feeling of smug complacency. We begin to see others' faults very clearly, whereas our own inadequacies seem very insignificant. Obviously, such an attitude paralyses our ability to minister to people in love. The words of Paul in 1. Corinthians 4:6-7 bear serious attention (see 1.COR 4:6-7).

There are two fundamental concepts in that challenge designed to drive out arrogance. First of all, we must recognise that whatever there is of value in our lives is a gift of God's grace. "What do you have that you did not receive?" An understanding of the riches of God's grace must produce within us genuine humility. We see ourselves for what we really are, and that enables us to love others.
One of Moody's favourite sayings was, "Right now, I'm having so much trouble with D. L. Moody that I don't have time to find fault with the other fellow." Grace teaches us a proper perspective on our God-given gifts. When I take credit for what belongs to God, I am robbing Him of His glory and deceiving myself.

Second, I need an appropriate standard. "Who regards you as superior?" The proper way to become humble is not to run myself down trying to belittle myself. Rather, I need to stand straight and tall, recognising my strengths and abilities, but standing next to the Lord Jesus so that I can see myself in true perspective. It was William Temple who wrote, "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all." That is true, but it stops short of telling us how not to think of ourselves. The answer is that we are to fill our minds with the Lord Jesus. It is worship that drives out arrogance and pours in love.

Love is Sensitive to People

The last description of the attitudes of love toward people is difficult to translate adequately. The text literally reads, "It does not act shamefully." "It does not act in an unbecoming way," and therefore "it is not rude."

Two very significant ideas seem to be involved here. First, love is sensitive to other peoples' sensibilities. Love is concerned not to offend, and therefore it is courteous. Because a loving person is others-centred, not self-centred, he will be very concerned to act in such a way that other people feel at home and comfortable. Sometimes we dismiss good manners and etiquette as old fashioned and unnecessary, but in fact they are part and parcel of the Christian life. We must be sensitive to others and in practical ways avoid discourtesy or rudeness. George Sweeting reminds us that "to do little things for others, in a way that is genuine, is to prove one's love. Love does not behave in a discourteous manner. Greed does; selfishness does; fear does - but not love."

But Paul is telling us more than that love is courteous. The word "act shamefully" is consistently used in the New Testament with regard to sexual matters. It is used of the sexual organs, of immodest dress, and of sexually suggestive conversation. Therefore, Paul is telling us that love is not sexually suggestive in action, apparel, or conversation. It is modest and sensitive to its impact on others in the sexual area. Love is committed not to put a stumbling block in another believer's way in the area of sexual purity. That was an important issue for the Corinthians, who lived in a sex-saturated society, and it is no less urgent in ours. Modesty is not a virtue much valued in our self-indulgent society, but that means we must be even more alert to that quality of love.

We are told that when Averill Harriman was appointed as the American ambassador to France, a reporter asked him, "Sir, how is your French?" "Oh, my French is excellent," he replied, "all except for the verbs." Verbs, of course, are the key to language, and in the same way, verbs are the key to love. Paul has listed six verbs that describe the actions revealing the basic attitudes of love. How are your verbs?

The Risks of Love

We are not told a great deal in the New Testament about Paul's friend Epaphroditus, but what we are told is significant. In fact, we are told to "hold such in reputation: Because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me." (PHIL 2:29-30). Epaphroditus had been sent by the Philippian believers to minister in their behalf to Paul during his first imprisonment in Rome. Precisely what happened we are not told. What we do know is that Epaphroditus came to the point of death but kept on, risking his life in love by serving the apostle. He proved himself to be a model friend, available and involved under pressure, a living example of quality friendship.
The word Paul uses to describe Epaphroditus’s ministry, ‘paraboleuo’ ("risking his life"), is a gambling word that has its roots in a Greek gambling game similar to horseshoes. The word came to mean "to risk oneself, to take a chance", and that was the quality of Epaphroditus's life. He had deliberately made himself vulnerable and taken a risk so that he could meet the needs of Paul. Years later, there were a group of Christians challenged by the example of Epaphroditus, who called themselves the 'parabolani', the "gamblers", the "risk-takers". They took upon themselves the responsibility of ministering to people no-one else would help - they nursed the sick, visited the imprisoned, and buried the martyrs. When a plague hit the city of Carthage in 252 A.D., the pagans threw the corpses out of the city, then ran way into the hills. It was a group of "God's gamblers" who risked their lives to care for the sick and bury the dead.

God's love cares. At the very centre of the New Testament stands the cross, the eternal symbol of love that risks and hurts and makes itself vulnerable. Such love calls for courage, but it is the very essence of Christian friendship that it takes the chance and pays the price. There is nothing very sentimental about such love, and it is often "tough love" indeed, but there is no real alternative. Lovelessness shrivels the soul. Without the risk of love, there can be no returns of love. Paul goes on to describe in verses 5 and 6 five more features of love, which reveal its basic motive, its choices, and its joys.

**The Motive of Love**

Of all the descriptions of love, there is none that probes more deeply or challenges more strongly than the seventh description, "*Love does not seek its own.*" The earlier descriptions have focused on how love relates to other people, but this verb forces us to consider how a loving person views himself. He has told us that love does not seek what belongs to someone else or cling to what it has ("*love does not envy*"). Neither does it parade or seek praise for what it possesses ("*love is not boastful*"). Rather love is prepared to give up what rightfully belongs to it, because it does not seek its own. Love is intensely selfless.

"Looking out for number one" has become a national way of life, and it stands in direct opposition to the way of love, which does not seek its own. The problem is not new. The assembly in Corinth was filled with people who were seeking their own way, regardless of the impact upon others. Selfishness had poisoned their view of Christian liberty, so that some indulged in questionable practices without any concern for their more sensitive brothers or sisters. It had turned the Lord's table into a celebration of division and party spirit, rather than a focal point of fellowship and unity in remembering the Lord Jesus. Their "selfism" had turned the doctrine of spiritual gifts into a search for the spectacular and the exciting, rather than a desire to be encouraging and edifying. All of that "seeking their own" earned from Paul the biting rebuke that they were living like mere men and displaying nothing of true spirituality (1.COR 3:1-4). "Do Your Own Thing" may be a popular slogan, but it is also the essence of sinful selfishness.

A life curved in on itself cannot act in love. The attitude is beautifully reflected in the classified advertisement that appeared in a rural New York newspaper:

Farmer, age 38, wishes to meet woman about 30 who owns tractor, Please enclose picture of tractor.

(I suppose you call that a John Deere letter?) It reflects the attitude of self-centred "love" - "I love you for what I can get from you." "I love you for what you can do for me."

**The Essence of Love**

When Paul says of love, "*It does not seek its own,*" he is speaking to a basic need not only of the Corinthians but of us as well. It is interesting that the sentence is unfinished so that we ask, "Its own what?" Its own reputation, its own rights, its own fulfilment, its own possessions. Love, God's
love, is radically other-centred. The great Russian novelist Dostojevski once wrote, "To love a person means to see a person as God intended him to be." That is a beautiful insight, but it does not go quite far enough. To love a person is not only to see a person in that way, but to act so that he will become the person God intends him to be.

One of the most important and familiar passages in the New Testament was written to teach us that love does not seek its own. We turn to it most often for the magnificent truths it contains about the Lord Jesus, but like many great Christ-centred passages, it focuses upon Christ to help us bring our own actions into clearer focus. Notice how Philippians 2:1-11 sets out the truth that love "does not seek its own." (see PHIL 2:1-11).

The Pattern of Unselfish Love

According to those verses, true love does not begin in the heart but in the mind! For most of us, that is a revolutionary concept. I cannot love properly unless I think correctly and build proper attitudes. "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus." Learn to think His way, and then you will begin to love His way. There are three attitudes I need carefully to cultivate: an attitude toward my rights, an attitude toward my service, and an attitude toward my Lord. They combine to free us from the morass of self-centred love.

1. My attitude toward my rights. A church discussion had grown rather heated. One angry man stood up, slammed his hand on a table, and shouted, "I want my rights, I demand my rights." At that, one of the mature leaders of the church graciously responded, "Friend, we are glad to give you the right to speak, but I do want to remind you of one thing. If you truly had your rights, you would be in hell." That insight is the place where Christian love begins. When I am overwhelmed by the grace of the Lord Jesus and fully realise that I am not my own because I have been redeemed with a price, I begin to think far more about my responsibilities than my rights.

There are two very different attitudes I can choose to adopt toward life. I can believe that I am entitled to certain things, that they are owed to me by God and others. Those things are my rights, I intend and expect to have them, and I believe others are responsible to help me obtain them. That is not the mind of Christ, who was, by His equality with the Father, entitled to the glory of heaven. But God the Father had given Him a commission, and the Saviour viewed Himself as one who had been entrusted with a ministry. Laying aside His rights, He carried out His God-given responsibilities, delighting to do the will of God.

That is the second view of life: that I have been entrusted by my God with great opportunities and responsibilities. There can be no true love unless I view my life as a God-given stewardship, and commit myself to not seek my own thing but to do the will of the Lord who sends me. D. L. Moody beautifully expressed that attitude when he said, "Life is simply a stewardship and not an ownership; a trust and not a gift. With a gift you may do as you please, but with a trust you must give an account."

A national magazine recently ran an advertisement that described the people for whom its magazine was written. They were, the copy declared, people who could say, "I LOVE ME. I am not conceited, I'm just a good friend to myself. And I like to do whatever makes me feel good." That is the common language of self-love, but it is impossible to imagine such words on the lips of the Lord Jesus. The language of His love does not suffer from such "I-trouble."

When Charles Spurgeon was a young man, he was prevented from going to theological college by what seemed a foolish mistake. When he arrived for his interview, he was ushered into a room where he waited for two hours. Only then did he discover that the maid had ushered the principal of the school into the next room and told neither of the other's presence. By the time the mistake was discovered, the principal had left and Spurgeon walked away, irritated and discouraged. His hopes and dreams for the future had collapsed. But as he walked, the Holy Spirit took Jeremiah
45:5 and pressed it home to his heart, "And seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not..."

Those words came home with tremendous force to Spurgeon: "This led me to look at my position from another point of view, and to challenge my motives and intentions... Although at the time I anticipated obscurity and poverty as the result of the resolve, yet I did there and then solemnly renounce the offer of Collegiate instruction, determined to abide for a season at least with my people, and to remain preaching the Word so long as I had strength to do it."

The surrender of his right to control his own destiny to do the will of God was a major turning point in Spurgeon's life. He was not seeking his own things, but his Lord's, and within a year the Lord opened an amazing ministry for the teenage preacher in London.

It is that surrender of our rights, that commitment to do the will of God, that refusal to "seek our own" that frees us to love. When I am committed to the concept that my life is in the hands of God, that He will protect my rights, that I am entrusted and not entitled, I have the attitude that enables me to love.

2. My attitude toward the Lord's work. A second and closely related attitude is an attitude toward serving the Lord. It has been pointed out that in a battle there are two very different types of problems, those of the front lines and those of the back lines. On the front, the central problem is the enemy. There are real bullets, there are constant dangers, there are urgent needs, and teamwork is essential. However, farther away from the smell of the powder, secondary issues become more important. People there complain about the food, or about the snoring of the fellow in the next bunk, or about any one of a dozen other things. Or, to shift the imagery, when I sit in the stands at a football game, I may complain that the coffee is cold, but the quarterback who is being blitzed by his opponent has an entirely different set of concerns. Grandstand issues are not playing-field issues.

The same principle applies to Christian living. If we are on the back lines or in the stands, it becomes very easy to "major on minors." Because we are not in the heat of the action, our attention drifts to the trivial, and secondary issues begin to divide us and concern us. But when I am committed to doing a work for the Lord Jesus, and major on those things that really matter, I begin to appreciate those who are my brothers in the battle. Because my attention is not focused on my comfort but on serving my Saviour, I am able to give my life to others. That was the attitude Paul tried to teach the Corinthians in 1. Corinthians 9:19, when he wrote, "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more." It is a heart-commitment to the work of the Lord that prevents us from becoming so absorbed in ourselves that we seek our own things.

We must recognise that to say "love does not seek its own" is not to say that love is passive and unassertive. True love has very clear goals and a strong commitment to achieving them. Love does not drive us to seek things for ourselves, but just as certainly it drives us to do the will of God. It drives out selfishness by giving us a greater vision of what life is for.

3. My attitude toward the Lord Jesus. The factor that ultimately determines my ability to live a life that is not self-centred, is the degree to which I am Christ-centred. "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" means that I must spend time in worship, praise, thanks-giving, and meditation if I am going to model His love. The principle is an obvious one. If a high school athlete desires to become an expert quarterback, he may well choose an all-pro quarterback as his model. He will watch the films, read his advice, study his techniques, and to the extent that he models his hero, he will become an excellent player himself.

On a more profound level, the principle applies to our response to the Lord Jesus, with one crucial difference. My observation of a great human example inspires me, but time with the Lord Jesus transforms me. "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." (2.COR 3:18). As I spend time with the Servant of the Lord, He produces within me a servant's heart.
At an early stage in the history of Moody Bible Institute, D. L. Moody organised a Bible conference that brought guests from as far away as Europe. Late the first night, Moody was walking through the corridors when he noticed that his European guests had, in accordance with their custom, left their shoes in the hall to be cleaned overnight. Moody did not want to disappoint them, so he went down the hall to explain the situation to some of his students and to ask them to help. The first student responded, "Mr. Moody, I came here to study for the ministry. I didn't come here to shine shoes." The rest added their agreement, so Moody graciously dismissed them, and spent the rest of the night polishing those shoes himself.

Mr. Moody could have insisted on his rights and coerced the students into serving, or he could have refused to honour a foreign custom. But he was a man with a servant's heart, who had spent time with the One who said, "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matt 20:28). One of the great struggles of the believer's life is to have a servant's heart, but such a heart is essential to be a biblical lover, since love "does not seek its own."

The Choices of Love

The act of the will by which we choose not to seek our own is the basic choice of love, but it is not the final choice. In fact, by its very nature, love is constantly choosing. Two of those choices confront us at the conclusion of verse 6, describing a choice love always refuses and an option it always seeks.

Love's Refusal: Irritability

There are few descriptions of love in action more demanding than that found in the words "love...is not provoked," or better, "love...is not irritable." In fact, the standard is so high that some translations try to soften the impact by telling us that love is not "easily" provoked or "easily" angered. But the Greek text will not let us off so "easily". In fact, it is very clear: "love...does not get irritated." The Greek word for irritated, from which we derive the word 'paroxysm', means to be sharp or aggravating. It was used, for example, for the piercing irritating pain caused by a broken bone, or the aggravation caused by a fever that causes a person to feel irritable and out of sorts.

Therefore, what Paul is telling us is that love is not irritable, living with a readiness to become angry and lose control. To be irritable is to have an inner turmoil and lack of peace, which means that if anyone tilts me the wrong way, all my frustration pours out. "To be irritable is to be in a constant countdown for a temperamental blast-off. It is to have your insides coiled, ready to spring into fury." An irritable person is sharp and prickly. More significantly, he is unloving.

There are several things we should observe about irritability that will bring this passage into focus. Henry Drummond has called this "the vice of the virtuous". By that he meant that it is the disciplined person who knows what it means to become annoyed by the undisciplined and disorganised. Nothing frustrates a perfectionist who delights in cleanliness and order so much as a person who seems to be congenitally messy. The person who is quick mentally can be frustrated beyond words by a person who is rather slow and deliberate in thought.

The problem is, then, that irritability often affects us in the area of our strengths rather than our weaknesses, and no-one can provoke us more than those who are closest to us. Things that we would accept with good grace from others frustrate us beyond measure when they occur in our homes. I blush to admit that guests in my home often receive far more consideration from me than family members do. I hide my irritation from guests, but it is too often on open display before my children. The same thing can take place in a close friendship, and it is undeniable that more friendships terminate due to the slow accumulation of irritations than because of a sudden explosion or conflict.
Irritability is rooted in two things: selfishness and a lack of rest in God. We become irritated because others do not fit into our schedules, or our plans, or our ideas. We are annoyed when others do not treat us with the respect and thoughtfulness we clearly deserve. "Why is she taking so long to wait on that person? I was here first." "Who does he think he is, cutting into my space in traffic?" "Not now. Can't you see I'm busy?" At its root is self-centredness that demands that I be considered first, that I be served, that I be listened to.

The other source of irritability is a lack of rest in God's sovereign plans and purposes. When I am not at peace with myself, I am easily frustrated by others or by circumstances beyond my control. I can fret in frustration when my plane is delayed on the way to a conference, or when a snowstorm snarls the traffic and I have an appointment to keep. But what a difference it makes when anxiety is replaced by a confidence in the sovereignty of God as I prayerfully entrust the details to my loving Father, who is able to do beyond all that I can ask or think, and as I choose to give thanks whatever the circumstances. Anxiety increases irritability and causes me to think even more about myself. But a confident trust in the Father liberates me to meet the needs of others.

It is important that we realise that irritability is not inevitable. Often we excuse it. "I'm feeling rotten today." "I got out on the wrong side of bed today." "It's just my temperament." We have hundreds of excuses for our irritability, but in fact the Word of God tells me that when I am irritable, I am unloving. I must not simply accept my moods, I must challenge them and judge them in the light of the Word of God. Love chooses not to be irritable, or refuses to be irritable. Label it clearly in your life as God does. The next time you are honest enough to say to yourself, "I am irritable", add the next phrase, "and therefore I am unloving." Somehow, it doesn't sound too bad when I call myself irritable. But when I practice "truth in labelling" and name it for what God says it is - lovelessness - I am forced to judge it as an attitude contrary to the will of God.

Love's Choice: Forgiveness

If love refuses to be irritated, love also chooses to forgive. As Paul expresses it, love "does not take into account a wrong suffered." The King James translation, love "thinketh no evil", misses the point, because the word Paul uses is an accounting term, the word of an accountant who carefully records every transaction in a ledger. There are some people who have written in indelible ink on the pages of their memory every wrong done to them, every imagined slight, every rumour of mistreatment. All of those events are as clear as though they happened yesterday.

Forgiveness is a costly thing, because it always involves the payment of a price. It is an act of the will on the part of the offended person to choose to pay whatever price is involved, and a refusal to live in the past, remembering and replaying the offence. To forgive does not mean to deny the action or to refuse to judge it. It means to see it for what it is, to choose to pay the price, and to refuse to act toward the other on the basis of past failure. Only when I realise how much I have been forgiven by the Lord Jesus will I be enabled to forgive like that and see my friend's failures through eyes of mercy.

It is very tempting to harbour resentment and to nurse our bitterness over another's actions. I will never forget one couple whose marriage was dissolving. The bone of contention was the husband's failure to fulfil a promise made to his wife about a household construction project. The issue was hardly insurmountable, and his explanation was at least partly feasible, although he offered no excuses and asked to be forgiven. Finally, I turned to the wife and said, "It seems to me that you have a clear choice. You can choose to forgive and forget, or you can destroy the relationship." Her answer was cold and final: "I'd rather remember." At that moment, the marriage all but died. The alternative to forgiveness is a bitterness and resentment that enslaves and kills. The prison of bitterness is an awful place. Forgiveness is not easy. But difficult as it may be, it brings with it the blessing of restored and growing relationships, and a closer walk with the Lord. Good friends are good forgivers.
The Joy of Love

Love is indispensable, but it does not exist in isolation from truth or in opposition to it. Love has been very helpfully compared to a river, flowing between the banks of truth and discernment. Within those banks, it is a river of life, bringing blessing wherever it flows. But when the banks are broken down, it becomes an agent of destruction, sweeping away whatever lies in its path. The analogy is both appropriate and true to Scripture.

Although our modern world loves "love", it has little concern for God's truth. Therefore, what it calls "love" leaves a trail of destruction in its path. One of the shortest books in Scripture expresses the balance perfectly, "And this is love, that we walk after his commandments." (2.JN 6). That balance of truth, discernment, and love is the message of the sixth verse of the great hymn of Love. Not only does love coexist with truth, but it also rejoices in it.

The Joy of Discerning Love

Love "does not rejoice in unrighteousness." That pithy statement indicates some significant things about love. First, love never rejoices in its own sin. It can never delight that it "got away with it," and unrighteousness is abhorrent to it.

Second, love takes no delight in the sins of others. This may seem strange, but it is possible to enjoy sin vicariously, and all we need to do to realise that is to consider the huge popularity of gossip magazines, the vast audience for suggestive or immoral movies and television programmes, and the rapid spread of the news of someone's fall into sin. It is also possible to rejoice in unrighteousness when we hear that sin has entered the life of someone we dislike and his reputation has been shattered. The way you use the telephone, the magazines you read, the programmes you watch - did you ever consider that those are tests of your love?

A third message of this phrase is that love never accepts sin although it loves the sinner. Love must walk with a sure step on a razor's edge between two extremes. At one extreme we reject the sinner along with his sin. At the other, we accept the sinner and appear to condone his sin. Love does neither, for true love is discerning love, a love with clear standards. "Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good." (ROM 12:9).

The Joy of Truthful Love

Love can never rejoice about sin, because the two are completely different in nature. Love "rejoices with the truth." The picture is of Siamese twins who share a common nature and a common joy. Because they are knit together, love can never be indifferent to truth. When truth triumphs, love rejoices. When truth suffers, love grieves, because love loves truth.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this: love insists on the truth, God's truth. That means it is never loving to pretend that biblical doctrine does not matter. Even friendship is not as important as God's truth. Often we are called to join our hands "under the banner of love" with those who deny the central truths of God's Word. But such an ecumenism is neither loving nor honest. It is not loving because it deceives people and leads them away from saving faith in the Lord Jesus. There are eternal issues at stake here. To leave people with the impression that there are many ways to God, and that we are all one happy spiritual family headed for the same heaven, will lead the deceived to hell. Neither is such unity honest, because it is a deceptive facade. Love rejoices when God's truth is loved and proclaimed.

Love also rejoices when truth is lived. Doctrinal orthodoxy without practical obedience brings no delight to the heart of God. Love not only speaks in love, but it also practices love. The error of ungodly living is as contradictory to love as the error of unbiblical thinking.
A Love that Never Quits

Most troubled marriages do not explode. They slowly grow stale. Vitality is replaced by ritual and instead of growth, there is a long, monotonous plateau. Boredom probably kills more marriages than does unfaithfulness. The same thing happens with friendships. We grow tired of them, as the attraction ebbs. Or because we live in a transient society that places little value on permanence, we choose to build temporary relationships. In fact, the concept that marriage is meant to last a lifetime, or that friendships can be lasting, is usually considered to be as outmoded as the horse and cart.

In that light, it is important for us to realise that the last four characteristics of love focus on its persistence and perseverance. In verses 8 to 13, Paul shows us that love is permanent because it is designed to remain throughout eternity. But verse 7 points us to the present quality of love - that it persists, it endures, it continues on, no matter how long the delay or how difficult the circumstances.

Vince Lombardi, the great Green Bay Packers coach, became famous for his slogan “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” A more biblical statement would be, "When the going gets tough, the tough keep going.”

We need the reminder of verse 7 that there is a toughness about true love, a determination to continue. It is probably true, in fact, that love is only shown in its true colours when it is difficult to love. Sexual attraction fluctuates, but love endures and grows. Infatuations pass, but love persists. Casual friendships flourish when it is convenient, but love thrives when it is inconvenient. True love, ‘agape’ love, never quits.

William Carey is widely hailed as the father of modern missions. He was a cobbler with little formal education when he came to faith in the Lord Jesus, and his vision to see his Lord glorified in heathen lands led him to “attempt great things for God; expect great things from God.” He was thirty-two years old when he left England for India to begin missionary work there. The challenge was awesome, and the obstacles were enormous; from the burden of a mentally ill wife and a large family, to the size of the missionary task in India, with its numerous languages, vast population, and strong indigenous religions.

"I am in a strange land, alone, no Christian friends, a large family, and nothing to support their needs," he wrote home. For forty years, he served his Lord in India, and he did, in fact, achieve great things for God, especially in the area of translation. Asked the reason for his success, he replied, "I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything."

That is the quality of love we need to emphasise. If my love for the Lord Jesus means anything, it will enable me to persevere and persist in difficult circumstances. If I love another person, that love will be manifested by endurance, by a tough-skinned refusal to give in under the most adverse circumstances. Shakespeare reminds us, "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds." In 1. Corinthians 13:7, the apostle gives us four descriptions of love that describe the enduring quality of love by showing us what love always does.

The Protection of Love

Our first statement about love in verse 7 introduces us to a word so rich in meaning that one English word cannot possibly convey its significance. Love "bears all things" conveys part of the meaning, but even that rendering is rather vague. There are at least three word pictures involved in the word ‘stego’, each of which reveals a different facet of love.

First of all, the word tells us that love always protects. The word ‘stego’ conveys the idea of a roof, or a covering, designed to keep off the elements, the sun or the rain. For example, in Mark
2:4 we are told that the paralytic's friends got their friend to the Lord Jesus by digging through the roof ('stege'). In other contexts, the word refers to a watertight covering designed for protection.

It is the instinct of love to protect people. Important as programmes and institutions are, love never loses sight of the individual. Love is concerned to create an environment in which people are sheltered and cared for, in which needs are recognised and ministered to and hurts are taken seriously. That is far more difficult than it sounds. Even as I write these words, I am trying to contact a young man who has been wounded because I was apparently too busy to see his need as an individual. Priorities are difficult to balance, but the principle is important: love protects people.

A second idea contained here is that love always covers faults. The idea of 'stego' as a covering, or a roof, led to its use in a metaphorical sense, "to pass over in silence, to keep confidential, secret or hidden." Thus love covers over the weaknesses and failings of others and throws a blanket of love over them. In a related sense, the word was used to describe a ship that was watertight and so, in this sense, "love springs no leaks." All of that is to say that love keeps confidences, that it refuses to gossip, and that it takes no delight in discussing sin and scandal.

We must be sure that we understand this. It does not mean that love can turn a blind eye to sin, or that it practices a Watergate type of cover-up, which tries to hide sin so that it will not be dealt with. In fact, the very opposite is true. Love confronts sin, but when it is possible to deal with it privately, love does so in order that the sinner might be restored to a consistent walk with the Lord Jesus.

The words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:15 are a perfect illustration of the strategy of love. He does not first say, "If your brother sins, tell it to the church," or, "Get on the phone and let others know." The command is, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." Unfortunately, private reproof is not always successful, and the Lord goes on to outline the steps by which an issue must be brought to the leaders of the church. But the public exposure of sin is something love does reluctantly. The instinct of love is to go to the sinning brother, to blanket him with the love of Jesus Christ, and to draw him back into fellowship, as we saw in Nathan's ministry to David.

There is a beautiful picture of this in Joseph's response when he discovered that Mary was pregnant. He had no desire to expose her or to stigmatise her, but neither could he ignore her apparent sin. Therefore, "being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily." (MATT 1:19). That is the way of love. It means a determination to put away a spirit of criticism and fault-finding and talking about others, and replace it with a longing to cover faults by seeing them dealt with before God.

It is easy to see people as sinners and failures. It is easy constantly to replay their inadequacies and shortcomings in our thoughts about them, in our responses to them, and in our conversations about them to others. But love takes seriously the grace of God and sees people as forgiven by the Blood of Christ. It refuses to freeze the picture of sin and failure in the mind, so as never to forget those sordid details.

Forgiving love is the way the Lord Jesus dealt with His men. He not only forgave Peter, but, in a special way, He gave him the opportunity to serve Him in the very area in which he had failed, that of public witness and testimony. The Lord did not say, "Peter, you blew it. From now on, please just be a silent witness." It was Peter the denier who became Peter the proclaimer at Pentecost. Even as great a man as godly Noah, a hero of faith, failed, but I appreciate the way his two sons Seth and Japheth dealt with him as he lay in his tent in drunken self-exposure. Not only did they throw a covering blanket over the evidence of his sin, but they refused even to look at him, so that that picture of their father's failure would not be engraved upon their memories (see GEN 9:20-23).

That is a concept found throughout God's Word: "Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins." (PROV 10:12). "He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter
separateth very friends." (PROV 17:9). "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." (JAM 5:19-20). "And above all things have fervent charity (love) among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins." (1.PET 4:8).

There is a final picture involved in the statement that love "bears all things." The word 'stego' came to be used not only for a roof that covers, but the pillars that support the covering. Thus it came to have the idea of 'bearing' or 'supporting'. From 'keeping out' it also came to mean 'to keep up' and was used in that way, for example, of ice strong enough to hold and support an army as it marched across it. The concept as it applies to love is very meaningful. Love always supports people. It senses when others are buckling under the load and moves in to strengthen and encourage them. Using a different word, but a related idea, Paul wrote to the Galatians, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (GAL 6:2).

Celeste Holm, the actress, has commented that "we live by encouragement and die without it, slowly, sadly and angrily." The picture given us in the words "love bears all things" is of love as an encourager and protector. It always protects people; it always covers faults from public exposure; it always supports. What a challenge this one description of love is!

The Persistence of Love

Several years ago, there was a story from Wales about two seventy-four-year-olds who had married, each for the first time. That was interesting, but hardly earthshaking until the whole story came out. The two were lifelong neighbours who had been parted by a lovers' quarrel when they both were thirty-two years old. Every week since then, for forty-two years, David Thomas had written a love letter apologising for his part in the quarrel and had slipped it under his neighbour's door. And with the same determination, Rachel Jones had burned each letter and refused even to speak to her suitor. Then one week, instead of slipping his letter under the door, David plucked up the courage and knocked on it. Rachel answered, he proposed, she accepted, and the wedding followed.

I don't know which is more impressive - their immaturity or their persistence, but at least there was a happy ending due to forty-two years of persistence. According to Paul, persistence is always a characteristic of love, and it is that quality that is emphasised in the last three descriptions of love given in verse 7 of the hymn of love.

The Trust of Love

The first of those statements tells us that love "believes all things." Immediately, we are presented with a problem. Is love gullible? Is love naive? Does love really believe the doctrines of a false teacher, paying no attention to the truths of the Word of God? Is Jonestown then a monument of love, since hundreds of people believed all the deceptions of Jim Jones to the point of dying? Does love believe the promises of the seducer or the charlatan? Does love close its eyes when a friend distorts the truth, or stubbornly "take his word for it" when the evidence clearly points the other way?

Surely that cannot be what the text means, since verse 6 tells us that love "rejoices in the truth." In fact, love insists on the truth, and that forces it to make some hard choices. Without discernment and truth, love is degraded into mere sentimentalism, or positive evil. Suppose I am a bank teller, and someone approaches me with a need. I cannot meet the need myself, but my bank has so much money that a few hundred dollars will make no real difference. Is love then to give someone else's money to meet a need? Is that loving to my employers or to the depositors? I need guidelines.
If as a parent I believe the person who wants to enrol my child in a programme, but do not take the time to investigate and discover that it is radically humanistic and immoral, am I really being loving to my child? Obviously not. Is it love to trust a glib salesman who turns out to be a fraud so that my family is forced into financial ruin? Certainly not. Love must have truth if it is to be truly loving. Love is not naiveté. I do not act in love toward a deceiver if I accept his lie, do not challenge it, and thereby encourage him to continue on in his sinful life-style.

What the Holy Spirit is telling us is that there are two ways I can approach people. I can be cynical and suspicious, demanding that others earn my trust and acceptance. In a world such as ours, filled with false claims and pretenders, and attitudes that say, "You prove yourself, buddy, before I'll listen," seems to be simple self-preservation. But when that attitude is transferred to the Body of Christ, it destroys fellowship. It produces legalism and rigidity, and erects barriers. The other attitude is grace-centred and chooses to believe the best. It fights suspicion and seeks to take a positive view of circumstances and people. It is not naive, but neither is it cynical or pessimistic. It chooses to trust, rather than distrust. It chooses to give the benefit of the doubt, to put the best construction on appearances. Only when we cultivate such a spirit are we freed from cynicism and enabled truly to accept people.

The Optimism of Love

But there are times when trust is broken, and people fail. The toughest problems in life are people-problems. How does love behave then? The answer is that when love's trust is broken, hope operates because love “hopes all things.” Where there is no evidence about another's character, love chooses to believe the best. When the evidence is negative, love determines to hope.

There are two things that inspire hope - the grace of God and the power of God. Humanly speaking, failure often is final. "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound:" (ROM 5:20). All the king's horses and all the king's men may not be able to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, but the King can. I need to develop an incurable confidence that the Lord can and will change people, no matter how impossible the situation seems. This optimism is part of love's character.

Amy Carmichael puts it with penetrating power in her little book "If":

If I do not look with the eyes of hope on all in whom there is even a faint beginning, as our Lord did, when just after His disciples wrangled about which of them should be the greatest, He softened His rebuke with those heart-melting words: “You are those who have continued with Me in My temptations,” then I know nothing about Calvary love.

Thomas Edison is among the twentieth century's most creative figures, credited with hundreds of inventions that we now take for granted but that make daily life a little easier. Few of his inventive victories were easily won. They involved a stubborn persistence through failure. Asked the secret of his success, he replied, "I never allow myself to become discouraged under any circumstances.... The three great essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are, first, hard work; second, stick-to-itiveness; third, common sense." That is the language of love as well. There is nothing very romantic about a refusal to become discouraged and a determination to keep going and to keep hoping. But love can be optimistic when it rests upon the power and grace of God.

The Endurance of Love

The final verb that describes love is that it “endures all things.” We began with the reminder that love suffers long. We conclude with the realisation that it remains under difficult circumstances and keeps on going. The word endure in Greek comes from two words that combine to say "to remain under." Endurance is that capacity to stay under the load, to remain in the circumstances without fleeing or seeking the easy way out.
We live at a time when people are fleeing responsibility. Marriages break up because a partner just does not want the burden. Ministries in churches go unfulfilled because people who claim to follow a crucified Saviour do not want to be "tied down". "What's in it for me?" has become a national anthem. If we want to examine whether or not we have a worldly spirit, we should recognise that it will be reflected just as clearly by our attitude toward responsibility as by our attitude toward certain forms of amusement. True love has staying power. It pays the price of commitment and keeps going, especially when it would be far easier to give in to relieve the pressure. "Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?" (PROV 20:6, NIV). "Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth, and a foot out of joint." (PROV 25:19).

There is one thing we should notice about the word endure. It is not primarily a negative or passive quality. It does not mean that we submit ourselves to difficult circumstances with a spirit of resignation and defeat. The idea behind the word is that of a soldier staying in the heat of the battle, under terrible opposition, but pressing forward to gain a victory. William Barclay captures the sense of the word in this way:

"It is not the patience which can sit down and bow the head and let things descend upon it and passively endure until the storm is passed... It is the spirit which can bear things not simply with resignation, but with blazing hope; it is not the spirit which sits statically enduring in the one place, but the spirit which bears things because it knows that these things are leading to a goal of glory; it is not the patience which grimly hopes for the end, but the patience which radiantely hopes for the dawn. It has been called a "masculine constancy under trial"... It is the quality which keeps a man on his feet with his face to the wind. It is the virtue which can transmit the hardest trial into glory because beyond the pain, it sees the goal. George Matheson, who was stricken in blindness and disappointed in love, wrote a prayer in which he pleads 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." Only 'hupomone' (endurance) can enable a man to do that.

The Path to Love

At this point, we face the problem expressed by the little boy who went to an amusement park with his friend. His funds were limited and so he chose his rides very carefully. His friend urged him to join him on the merry-go-round, but the little fellow stubbornly refused. So the friend jumped on by himself, had a great ride, and as they walked away to new experiences, turned and asked his buddy why he had not joined him. "Well, it's like this. Ya spent all your money, ya got off where ya got on, and ya ain't been nowhere!"

That is the danger of spending time in 1. Corinthians 13 if we do not apply it to our lives. We may be more familiar with the fifteen characteristics of love, but we may be no closer to seeing them operate in our friendships and relationships. In fact, the standard is so far beyond usual human standards of love that we may be tempted to give up. "Where do I learn to love like that?"

There are three concepts that we must nail down in our thinking.

Love is not an Option, but an Inescapable Responsibility

There are at least three things that inform us that love is absolutely essential. First of all, it is the command of the Lord Jesus and the badge of discipleship. "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (JN 13:34-35).

Second, love is the key to relationships within the Body of Christ and to ministry outside it. I can have no effective ministry without love, for, as 1. Corinthians 13 has told us, without love I achieve nothing, I am nothing, I receive nothing. If I minister without love, I contradict the model of the Lord
Jesus. I can only do His work in His way. To make anything less than 'agape' love the standard for my friendships is to settle for sub-Christian friendships.

Third, love is essential because it is the goal of Christian growth. The joy of heaven is that I will not only be with Christ, I shall be like Him. Our God is love, and one day I will be perfected in love. For my life today, that means growth in love is the evidence of maturity. "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour." (EPH 5:1-2).

Those facts force me to realise that I must not avoid the thrust of 1. Corinthians 13:4-7 by reading it merely as a description of the perfect love of Christ. It is not written about Him, but to me. Neither can I hold this up as a standard for the super-spiritual. This is God's will for my life; an imperative, not a luxury.

That Love is God's Love, not Ours

The flesh will never produce the love of which Paul writes, and all of the best intentions in the world will never produce such love. 'Agape' love is part of the fruit of the Spirit, as Galatians 5:22-23 reminds us. The fruit (note the singular) of the Spirit being the nine-fold quality of Christ-like character. The love of God is not the product of legalism or self-effort, but rather it is "shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." (ROM 5:5). The Holy Spirit works within us whenever we are living in conscious fellowship with the Lord Jesus. As we focus on Christ, the fruit of Christ's love is manifested in our lives. We cannot "work up" to true love by our own efforts. 'Agape' is the product of God's work in our lives. We must be in contact with the source of love if it is to flow out of our lives to others.

We Must Walk in the Spirit if We are to Learn How to Love

"Walk in the Spirit," Paul wrote in Galatians 5:16, "and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh." That is a statement about the general pattern of our lives. We are to live in dependence upon, and be guided by, the Holy Spirit, as He teaches us through the Word of God and leads us as the one who indwells us. In verse 25 of Galatians 5, Paul becomes even more specific. "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." The word walk is more specific than that used in verse 16, and means "to walk in line" or "keep in step" with the Spirit. It is used, for example, in Romans 4:12 where we are told to "walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham." Walking in the Spirit, then, is not just to be the general course of our life, but our constant experience. We are to take each step by the Spirit, and as we do, the fruit of the Spirit will become evident in our lives.

What is involved in taking each step in the Spirit? Since the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture, it must mean living in obedience to the written Word of God. The Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture will never lead the believer apart form the Word or away from the Word. A second concept is that of dependence upon the Holy Spirit. To walk "in line with the Spirit" means to rely upon and trust His guidance. To walk by means of the Spirit means that I walk by faith, refusing to trust the flesh. Obedience and dependence are the keys.

But we do not learn to walk apart from experience. No new-born infant has ever hopped out of its crib and started to run around the room. Slowly but surely, step by step, he develops the skill and the experience that enable him to walk. There are uncountable falls, but none of them is final, and as experience increases, skill develops, and a baby's capacity increases. The process of spiritual walking is the same. There are bumps, there are falls, but the more we walk in the Spirit, in dependence and obedience, the more spiritual range we develop and the more we learn what it is to live in love.

Just keep walking!
The Permanent and the Passing

When I was growing up, we had a plaque in our home that constantly reminded me of a life-changing fact:

Only one life, ‘twill soon be past.
Only what’s done for Christ will last.

That is a great motto to hang on the walls of a child's mind, because it builds an awareness of a fact that is so obvious that we tend to neglect it. There is a constant battle throughout our lives to determine whether we are investing for time, or for eternity. Because the demands of life press upon us with such urgency, we often do not take the time to step back to discover whether or not our energies are being devoted to what is by its very nature temporary.

It is a syndrome Charles Hummel has called “the tyranny of the urgent.” As he points out, the crush of things that "must be done" crowds out the truly important things that ought to be done, but which can be postponed. It is urgent that I answer the phone, cut the lawn before guests arrive, attend the committee meeting, conclude this business deal; and all those must be done now. It is obviously important that I spend time with my wife and children, that I visit my friend in the hospital, that I get into God's Word for a time with the Lord, that I seek out my friend who seems to be drifting and needs someone to encourage and exhort him. But all those important things, each of them demands an investment of our most precious commodity, time.

It is only in the light of eternity that time has meaning. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom," Moses prayed in Psalm 90:12. Clearly what is permanent and eternal is what is truly important and even urgent. Therefore we must learn to think and evaluate our activities in light of eternity and then to do things in order of importance.

That has a direct bearing upon our friendships because the Scriptures tell us that only two things in this world are eternal: the Word of God and people. It is only when we are using the Word of God to invest our lives in people that we are truly investing for eternity. When we love, we are living for eternity. Such a concept will transform our view of friendships and relationships, as we realise that friends are not simply God's gifts to us so that life will be more enjoyable; they are God's opportunities so that we may make eternal investments.

The Corinthians had come to place tremendous value upon spiritual gifts, especially the more spectacular gift of tongues. Their attitude toward speaking in tongues had divided the church and produced attitudes of superiority and inferiority. Spiritual gifts, used as God intended, are of great value, but even the greatest gift is only temporary in nature. But love is eternal. Love is permanent. That is the last great truth Paul wants to communicate about love in the great 'agape' chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. Having shown us the practices of love in verses 4 to 7, he concludes by describing for us the permanence of love in verses 8 to 13. Again, this is not merely theoretical. As we shall see, it is designed to correct some particular abuses in the Corinthian assembly and indirectly to give us some practical guidelines in choosing our own priorities (See 1.COR 13:8-13).

The Permanence of Love

The theme of this last section of the hymn of love is sounded in its opening words, "Love never fails." In one sense, the phrase is a bridge between the description that precedes and the comparison that follows, and Paul carefully chooses a Greek word, 'pipto', which is rich in nuances that combine to convey the permanent quality of love.
The Stability of Love

The primary meaning of the word ‘pipto’ is "to fall" or "to collapse". In the Lord's famous story of the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the foolish man who rested his foundation upon sand, the storm pounded against both homes, "the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house." (MATT 7:25,27). The foundation makes all the difference. Of the wise man's house, we read, "and it fell (pipto) not: for it was founded upon a rock" (v.25). The foolish man's experience was totally different; "it fell (pipto): and great was the fall of it." (v.27). A very similar use is found in Luke 13:4 where the Lord describes the tower of Siloam near Jerusalem, which fell and killed eighteen men.

The picture is an obvious one. Love does not collapse in ruins or fall to pieces. On the contrary, it is stable. That is in total contrast to the modern view expressed by one film star who said, "For two people to be able to live together for the rest of their lives is almost unnatural." We live in a time of plastic relationships and friendships built on sand. The problem is simply one of foundations. Love is stable when it rests upon a solid foundation, and the only adequate foundation for love and for life is the Lord Jesus Christ. Human love inevitably changes because people change. ‘Agape’ love rests upon the unchanging Christ, the one who is the "same yesterday, and to day, and for ever." (HEB 13:8), and therefore it possesses the quality of stability.

The Constancy of Love

A contrasting idea found in the word ‘pipto’ is that of constancy and continuance. The word describes an activity that comes to an abrupt end. Thus in secular sources, it describes soldiers who fall in battle or a ship that sinks. Obviously, both end normal activity. In the same way, we read in the New Testament of stars that "fall from heaven" (MATT 24:29; REV 6:13). How literally we are to take this is not certain, but what is clear is that they stop shining. They "fail".

Love never fails. Its activity is constant, because it overcomes circumstances and refuses to acknowledge defeat. The key to love's constancy is that it is not conditional. It does not demand that certain things be done before it will respond in a loving way. In his book "How to Cope", Lloyd Ahlem describes five characteristics of an emotionally coercive person. Such a person manipulates others through his emotions, his relationships, or some other device, with the goal of forcing others to act as he desires. In other words, he practices a thoroughgoing form of conditional love, and it is useful for us to evaluate our actions in light of Ahlem's description.

1. He wants you to solve your problems on his terms. Such love says, "This is your need and this is my answer. Do it my way or else." Now, the analysis may be correct, but the attitude is not, because it is coercive. This is a special danger when we have a genuine concern for people. We want to change them in our way rather than emphasising first our accepting love for them.

2. He wants to solve your problems sooner than later. "Change first and then I will accept you." But the Holy Spirit is not always in a hurry. The patience of the Saviour with His men is incredible. They changed because He accepted them, and that is always the way of love.

3. He is judgmental in nature, responding first to others' weaknesses rather than their strengths and potential. Love is grace-centred, as our Lord was.

4. He resists feelings of ambivalence. "Let's get with it" leaves little room for questions or for different growth patterns, or for various understandings of questionable issues. Conditional love tends to give the other person little breathing room.

5. He never quite accepts you for what you are. There is always one more step to climb or one more goal to achieve, before you have really arrived. Conditional love is never content.
Such love can never be constant. God's love is constant and unconditional because it flows from His character, not ours. So our love must flow from the Holy Spirit working within us, rather than being based on what others do or how they meet our needs.

The Freshness of Love

A final concept found in the statement, "Love never fails," is that love is unfading. A flower cut off from its roots will lose its bloom and eventually its leaves. "FOR ALL FLESH IS AS GRASS, AND ALL THE GLORY OF MAN AS THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERETH, AND THE FLOWER THEREOF FALLETH AWAY (ekpipto): BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURETH FOR EVER." (1.PET 1:24-25). In contrast to the fading glory of Creation, Scripture is unfading and perpetually fresh. "And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail (pipto)." (LK 16:17). God's Word is unfading and unchanging.

So is love. "Love never fails" tells us that a love that draws its source from the living God is fresh, alive, and vital. True love does not grow old; it matures. Time is not an enemy of love, because its source is God's own character. All that He ever was He is now, and so everything about God is perpetually fresh. That teaches us that if our love is "fading" or losing its vitality, it is not true 'agape' love. And true love will pass into heaven unchanged. Just as God's Word never fades or changes, so His gift of love never changes. Therefore, when His love is at work in my life, everything I do is eternal. Love never loses its significance.

The Surpassing Value of Love

"But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Paul's final evidence of the significance of love leaves behind the doctrine of spiritual gifts and focuses upon the three great Christian qualities of faith, hope, and love. Here are three virtues whose value none can doubt, and in essence all three are eternal.

Faith abides. In our present world, we walk by faith, not by sight, and we long for the day when faith gives way to sight. But for all eternity, we will exercise faith and trust in our God. Heaven is not static, but dynamic, and there will always be things to trust Him for.

Hope abides. Now our eyes are fixed upon "that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;" (TITUS 2:13). Yet even in heaven, hope will not be irrelevant. For all eternity, the future will be bright with the promise of knowing more and enjoying more of our God.

Supremely, love abides. My present faith will give way to a different kind of faith in God's presence. My present hope will be realised and take on another form. But love remains the same. Oh, it will be immensely richer and deeper, but it is the same love for the same Lord and His eternal family. At the basis of it all is the recognition that love is an attribute of God Himself. God is not a God of faith. Everything He does is based on complete knowledge. Nor is He a God who has hope. He sovereignly controls the future on the basis of His eternity. But He is a God of love. All that He is, all that He does, is controlled by love, and that is why "the greatest of these is love."

The implications of that are enormous. If love abides, love is never wasted. When I give myself in love to a friend, I am displaying the character of God and building for eternity. On the other hand, when I do not practice love, I am not only missing God's purpose for my life, but I am also sowing the seeds of destruction. Amy Carmichael has some very pointed words in this regard in a letter she wrote to her fellow-workers in the Dohnavur Fellowship:

Unlove is deadly. It is a cancer. It may kill slowly, but it always kills in the end. Let us fear it, fear to give room to it as we should fear to nurse a cobra. It is deadlier than any cobra...
drop of the gall of unlove in my heart or yours, however unseen, has a terrible power of spreading all through our Family, for we are one body - we are parts of one another. If one member suffers loss, all suffer loss. Not one of us lives to himself. If unlove be discovered anywhere, stop everything and put it right, if possible at once.

One of the great strengths of Amy Carmichael’s life was that she lived with a profound sense that only what is eternal is ultimately important. Seen in the light of eternity, love becomes urgently significant and eternally worthwhile. To be a biblical friend, to love others for Christ’s glory, not only fills our life with purpose and blessing, it produces rewards that can only be measured in light of eternity. When love is the motive of your actions, everything you do is eternal.

A Fellowship of Friends

For two years, the apostle Paul was held as a prisoner in Caesarea, awaiting the time he would be sent to Rome, where his appeal would be heard by Caesar. Finally, it was decided to send him under the custody of a Roman officer named Julius, and the ship set out northward along the Mediterranean coast. After one day, they came to the ancient Phoenician harbour of Sidon, and Luke tells us that, “Julius courteously entreated Paul, and gave him liberty to go unto his friends to refresh himself.” (ACTS 27:3). We could very easily pass over that simple statement without thinking about the truth it contains. Here was a group of Christians who could probably trace their origins back to the time when the early Christians were scattered from Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen (ACTS 11:19).

As far as we know, those people had never met the apostle Paul, since we have no record of his being in that area, but they had met the Lord Jesus, and therefore, in Christ, they were his friends. Actually, the phrase Luke uses is “the friends”, and it was apparently a title early Christians used for themselves. In Christ, they were “the Friends”. The apostle John concluded his final postcard epistle with the words, “Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name.” (3.JN 14).

What a concept to recapture in our day! The fellowship of believers is a fellowship of friends. We may not have known each other very well, but, because of the Lord Jesus, we are no longer strangers or acquaintances, but friends. We see that in the gospels, as the Lord Jesus knit together men as different in temperament as Peter the impetuous, Matthew the compromising tax-collector, and Simon the political zealot. United by Him, those Christians lived together, worked together, prayed and worshipped together, and even died together. Fellowship and friendship were very much a part of the life of the New Testament church, and as the power of their message was reflected in the purity of their relationships, they had an enormous impact on their times. The early Christian leader Tertullian could challenge the non-Christian world with these words:

It is our care for the helpless, our practice of loving kindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. Only look, they say, look how they love one another (they themselves being given over to mutual hatred). Look how they are prepared to die for one another (they themselves being readier to kill each other). Thus had this saying become a fact, "Hereby shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if you love one another."

Such quality friendship does not simply happen. It is born out of a fervent love for the Lord Jesus Christ that spills over into our relationships with people. As we have seen, biblical friendship is unique because it is built upon ‘agape’ love, so eloquently described in 1. Corinthians 13, so vividly illustrated in the friendship of David and Jonathan, and so completely realised in the love of the Lord Jesus for His disciples and for us. "You are my friends,” He tells us, and then He dies for us as the Friend beyond all others.

Quality friendship is costly. It does not thrive in an environment of casual commitments, convenient relationships, and formal fellowship. It demands that, in Christ, I begin by committing myself to be a friend, rather than just to "get a friend"; to meeting needs rather than seeking primarily to have my needs met. Quality friendship calls me to enter relationships not simply on the basis of mutual
attraction, but out of a commitment to help another realise his potential under God. As a friend, I seek to strengthen his or her hand in God. Quality friendship is covenant friendship, in which I declare to another my loyalty, commitment, and friendship. Quality friendship is 'agape' friendship, a friendship of humanly impossible standards made possible by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The Word of God uses many terms to emphasise that when we were united to the Lord Jesus Christ, we were also joined to one another. Thus we are "the family of God," related to our Father, but also to one another as brothers and sisters. We are members of "the Body of Christ," and it is God's intention "That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care for one another." (1.COR 12:25). One of the most vivid ways the Lord Jesus reveals His intention for the church is by a series of statements given about our responsibilities to one another. The phrase "one another" usually represents the Greek word 'allelon', and a consideration of the 'allelon' principle in the New Testament provides us with a tremendous study of what quality friendship will look like in action. Here is a list of those 'allelon' statements with duplicate references omitted, and what a list it is! In the Body of Christ, we are to:

- wash one another's feet (JN 13:14)
- love one another (JN 13:34 and many other times)
- be devoted to one another in brotherly love (ROM 12:10)
- give preference to one another in honour (ROM 12:10)
- be of the same mind toward one another (ROM 12:16; 15:5)
- stop judging one another (ROM 14:13)
- pursue the building up of one another (ROM 14:19)
- accept one another (ROM 15:7)
- admonish one another (ROM 15:14)
- greet one another (ROM 16:16)
- wait for one another (1.COR 11:33)
- care for one another (1.COR 12:25)
- serve one another through love (GAL 5:13)
- bear one another's burdens (GAL 6:2)
- show forbearance to one another (EPH 4:2)
- be kind to one another (EPH 4:32)
- forgive each other (EPH 4:32)
- speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (EPH 5:19)
- be subject to one another (EPH 5:21)
- regard one another as more important (PHIL 2:3)
- not lie to one another (COL 3:9)
- teach one another (COL 3:16)
- comfort one another (1.THESS 4:18)
- encourage one another (1.THESS 5:11)
- be at peace with one another (1.THESS 5:13)
- pursue good to one another (1.THESS 5:15)
- considering one another (HEB 10:24)
- not speak against one another (JAM 4:11)
- not complain against one another (JAM 5:9)
- confess your sins to one another (JAM 5:16)
- pray for one another (JAM 5:16)
- be hospitable to one another (1.PET 4:9)
- clothe yourself with humility toward one another (1.PET 5:5)

A fellowship of friends! That is the Lord's purpose for His church, realised in many first-century churches and realisable in ours. Our congregations are too large for us to have in-depth, intimate friendships with every member. The number of such close friendships will inevitably be quite small. But the principles of those intimate friendships can overflow into all our relationships with
our fellow believers, so that, more and more, all men will know that we are His disciples by our love for one another.

This book goes forth with the prayer that, as we come to know more of the friendship of our eternal Friend and as we understand and apply these great biblical principles of love and friendship, we might once again fulfill that purpose and be in truth "God's fellowship of friends."

by Gary Inrig


Some scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible.