

LOVE NEVER FAILS

*Meditations on the Chapter of Love
1 Corinthians 13*

Menes Abdul Noor

PREFACE

Today's church is similar to the first church in Corinth to a great extent. Just as the church in Corinth needed to emphasise love as described in the great chapter of love (1 Corinthians 13), we need the very same virtue today, which is the greatest of all virtues.

1. The church of Corinth was split into divisions and parties because people trusted in human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:1-12). Therefore, the apostle Paul told them that eloquence and philosophy did not have the first priority in his life (1 Corinthians 1:17-2:16), but that his one and only aim was to proclaim Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 3-4). For Christ tangibly revealed heavenly, self-sacrificing love to us, the love that gives without expecting anything in return.

Today's church also needs Christ's way of thinking, for the apostle's words to the Corinthian believers apply to us as well: "*There is jealousy and quarrelling among you*" (1 Corinthians 3:3).

2. The church of Corinth had sinned by accepting a man involved in sexual immorality with his father's wife. Perhaps it had accepted him because he was rich or held a distinguished position in society (1 Corinthians 5). If they had really loved him, they would have rebuked him for his sin so that he might repent before God. Love rebukes the sinner because it hates sin and loves the sinner. We also need that love today, which rebukes in order to bring people to repentance, as the sage says: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" (Proverbs 27:6).
3. The Corinthian church had evinced a quarrelsome spirit which loved problems and controversies so much that they took their cases against their brother believers to be judged by the pagan civil court (1 Corinthians 6). Love trusts the church and the believers. "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" (1 Corinthians 6:2). Think about how many lawsuits Christians have against other Christians in civil courts today!
4. The church of Corinth had sent a letter to the apostle Paul asking him about marriage (1 Corinthians 7) and food offered to idols, whether to eat it or abstain from it (1 Corinthians 8-10). Love is the solution. It is the answer to every question. For a man ought to love his wife as Christ loves the church, and the foundation of a happy home is true love. Moreover, love causes us to be sensitive to others, who agree or disagree with us on eating meat offered to idols or abstaining from it.

Today, we also need the chapter of love (1 Corinthians 13) in order to build our homes on love, our intellectual relationships with those around us on the foundation of love and our opinion of others starting with love.

5. The church of Corinth also asked Paul about the behaviour of women in the church (1 Corinthians 11:1-16). Love is the answer, for the one who loves, submits to the order of the church because he loves the Lord of the church. A good wife, whose heart is filled with love, does not speak loudly, nor does she disturb the purity of worship in the house of the Lord.
6. The church of Corinth also asked about the agape, or love, meal which used to precede Holy Communion (1 Corinthians 11:17-37). Here also, love is the answer. For the agape meal is an expression of the unity of the body, which is the church, and which will eat the same one bread and drink from the same one cup.
7. The apostle Paul also talked about the spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12, 14). There were some Corinthian believers who were proud of their gifts although these were given freely by God and were not earned by anyone's effort. The gifts are granted freely by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and those who possess them, whether they are natural talents or supernatural gifts, must use them for serving the body of Christ.

In between the two chapters where Paul speaks about the gifts, he presents the better way to us, which we should accept eagerly (1 Corinthians 12:31). For anyone who wants to show his zeal for Christ and his desire to build up His church must be perfect in love.

8. In 1 Corinthians 15 we find the discourse on the resurrection. Christ loved us so He came to us as a baby laid in a manger. He lived humbly among us here on earth, was crucified for our sake, died and was buried. He rose from the dead on the third day to be the firstborn of those who had passed away, to raise up everyone who believes in Him from the death of his sin, and to raise him up from the grave on the last day (John 5:28, 31). Everyone who has risen from the death of his sin and awaits the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, will give himself fully to the work of the Lord. He knows that his labour in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). For love is the essence of the life we need to live today. The great example of love is Christ, Who is Himself love incarnate. If you read the descriptions of love found in chapter 13 and substitute "Christ" for the word "love", you will find the meaning clear and true. Then you will read "Christ suffers long and is kind; Christ does not parade Himself; He is not puffed up; He does not behave rudely; He does not seek His own....". In Christ you find love become flesh.

Love was evident in Christ's life and teaching. He said about His sacrificial love: "*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends*" (John 15:13). He considered His sinful enemies, His friends. He washed the feet of His disciples, thereby showing perfect love. "*Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end*" (John 13:1).

Love was evidently the essence of His doctrine. He said, "*By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love one for another*" (John 13:35). "*This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you*" (John 15:12).

When He was asked about the first and most important commandment, He answered: "*The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these*" (Mark 12:29-31).

Now, let us study the chapter of love, love that "never fails". We will divide it into three sections:

- I. The importance of love** (verses 1-3).
- II. The attributes of love** (verses 4-7).
- III. The perpetuity of love** (verses 8-13).

Chapter 1

Love is the Most Important Virtue

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy and can understand all mysteries and all knowledge and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing"
(1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Today's church is very much like the church in Corinth. The church today is divided into many denominations, like the church in Corinth. Today's church is also more concerned with the gifts of the Holy Spirit than with the fruit of the Holy Spirit which begins with love (Galatians 5:22-23). Further, the church today is concerned with the gifts that attract the attention of the onlooker, e.g. speaking in tongues or healing, rather than important gifts such as, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership, showing mercy and love (Romans 12:6-9).

The apostle Paul deals with the spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14 of 1 Corinthians, but puts the chapter on love in between these. We need to meditate these days on the chapter of love so that we can correctly prioritise our natural or supernatural gifts and place the right focus on our potentials.

The apostle Paul says at the end of chapter 12, *"Earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I will show you a more excellent way"* (verse 31). By this he means the way of love. We need to apply the teaching of this chapter in order to prove that we are disciples of Christ.

We have become used to hearing about love from the apostle of love, John. He is called *"the disciple whom Jesus loved"* (John 13:23). We may also say that he is the disciple who loved Christ, for John's love of Christ is a true, faithful and strong echo of Christ's love of John. He says *"We love Him because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19). But the apostle Paul drops his bucket into the deep well of love in order to extract this living water for us, which we read about in 1 Corinthians 13.

The apostle Paul also tells us in Galatians 5:6 about the faith which saves, faith expressing itself through love, for he says: *"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love"*.

The importance of love lies in the fact that it is the proof of being a disciple of Jesus, for He said: *"By this all will know that you are My disciples if you have love one for another"* (John 13:35).

1. Love is more important than tongues and eloquence

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1).

By "tongues of angels" the apostle Paul may mean a language more sublime than any language spoken or known by human beings, like the language which he heard when he was caught up to the third heaven and heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell (2 Corinthians 12:4). "Tongues of angels" may also mean the foreign languages which those who were filled with the Holy Spirit spoke on the day of Pentecost. In any case, speaking any language, however sublime and however much above human understanding it may be, is like sounding brass or clanging cymbals without love. These are very simple, basic, cheap musical instruments and the rhythm they produce is the simplest possible, so they don't move anyone. So, fantastic eloquence and sublime language, however exalted, are like the simplest and cheapest musical instruments, if they are without love.

The apostle Paul is not speaking here about the understandable languages which God gave to His apostles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4), but about unintelligible languages which people in the Corinthian church were speaking. The apostle Paul says about them: *"For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries... I wish you all spoke with tongues, but I even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets that the church may receive edification. But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying or by teaching? Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played?... Yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue... Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (1 Corinthians 14:2, 5-7, 19, 23).*

So tongues, however lofty, if they are unintelligible, they do not move nor stimulate anyone who listens to them. But a word of instruction edifies.

The Corinthian believers were uttering unintelligible words to anyone and in uttering them, their sentiments were devoid of love. The reason is that they were proud of their gift towards others. So their unintelligible words gave no blessing to the hearers. They were just a source of personal self-exaltation, for love was absent from them.

When someone does not have much love, he will only be concerned with God's gift to him and forget the Giver. In the same way, a child who receives a gift takes it from his father and runs away with it without thanking him, because the child is more concerned with the gift than with the father who gave it. But a child's way of thinking is simple. Unfortunately, we find many people who are more concerned with their spiritual gifts than with the Giver of the gifts. However, love is more important than the gifts, because love unites us with the Lord of the gifts and makes us use the gifts in

the best way, in readiness to serve others. But if we concentrate on the gift itself without loving the Giver and without regard for the purpose for which He gave it to us, our gift will be like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal, no matter how exalted it may seem in our eyes or anybody else's!

When someone does not have much love, he will be proud because of God's gift to him. Feeling his pride, the other believers will keep away from him. In this situation his gift does not build up, but destroys. Instead of uniting, it separates. This is why the gift is useless without love.

There were orators in the early church who proclaimed the Gospel and preached Christ out of envy, contentiousness and factionalism. They were insincere, supposing that they could stir up trouble for the apostle Paul (Philippians 1:15-16). They were teachers and their rhetoric was convincing, but their motives were devoid of love. So they were nothing but a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. However, the apostle Paul explained what he felt about the work of such teachers, saying: "*What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice. For I know that this will turn out for my salvation through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 1:18-19). This is the most eloquent love, more exalted than any rhetoric!

2. Love is more important than prophecy and knowledge

"Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2a).

The apostle Paul defined prophecy as "*He who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men*" (1 Corinthians 14:3). Prophecy is not only foretelling the future, but it is teaching and exhorting the believers. In the chapter of love, the apostle affirms that prophecy without love is nothing. For the one who exhorts, must love those whom he exhorts. The one who foretells a future blessing must love those to whom he foretells it. The one who foretells a future punishment must announce it with every compassion towards those who are to be punished, as Jeremiah said, "*Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people*" (Jeremiah 9:1).

Knowledge as a gift, is the knowledge of deep spiritual secrets which we preach about. Prophecy and knowledge are connected, for the one who knows mysteries is the one who will teach them in preaching. The greatest mystery which reveals God's love towards us, is "*the mystery of godliness*" (1 Timothy 3:16). God loved the world so much that He came into our world in the flesh, in Christ, in order to manifest His love to us and to take away from us the punishment for our sin, offering Himself up as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. How can God love sinful mankind all that much? This is a heavenly mystery, but its proof is the incarnation of Christ.

There is another great mystery: God has chosen us Gentiles to share the heritage of all those of the chosen Jewish people who accepted Christ. This is "*the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the*

prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey Him" (Romans 16:25-26). So, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, because God so loved the whole world.

The psalmist tells us, "*The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him*" (Psalm 25:14). God declares the secrets of His kingdom to those who confide in Him, because He loves them and they love Him. If anyone knew all the secrets of heaven and taught them without having a heart full of love, he would be nothing. The Jewish religious leaders knew all the secrets of the prophecies of the coming of Christ and His birth in Bethlehem from a virgin. When they were asked about the place where He was to be born, they answered correctly, quoted the prophecy about it, and specified where it was found in the Torah (Matthew 2:5-6). However, not one of them set out to go to Bethlehem in order to see the Saviour born in the town of David and longed for, by all the nations. As for those who loved God, they came from the most far-away countries to search for Him, and they offered Him gifts.

We read about a prophet called Balaam in the Old Testament. He said, "*the utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, and the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened; the utterance of him who hears the words of God and knows the knowledge of the Most High*" (Numbers 24:15-16). Balaam declared the oneness of God, he was from the homeland of Abraham, the friend of God, and his reputation was so widespread that people came to him from all over so that he could foretell their future and bless them and their purchases. His heart, however, had no love for the people of God. It was full of the love of money, for King Balak hired him to curse the children of Israel. When he was unable to do so because God hindered him, he advised the king to ensnare them to worship idols and engage in unclean acts. He ended up being killed by the sword (Numbers 31:16). The apostle Peter described the people who go astray like this, "*They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness*" (2 Peter 2:15). So, the prophet Balaam became nothing, because his heart was devoid of love.

Also, in the New Testament we read about a prophecy from a prophet with a heart devoid of love. The Gospel describes him in this way, "*And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.' Now he did not say this on his own authority, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad*" (John 11:49-52). Caiaphas foretold the death of Christ for the whole world, and his prophecy was true, but he was devoid of love, for Caiaphas plotted with the other Jewish leaders to have Christ crucified.

There may be a great preacher whose heart is devoid of love. He may even be able to make a message of God's love reach a person who needs it. However, people are not influenced by the great eloquence by which a preacher proclaims his prophecy and his knowledge, if he has no love. For without love we cannot come close to God, and we cannot bring people close to God.

Love is greater than prophecy and knowledge because it comes at a time when we need neither exhortation nor knowledge, but there never is a time when we do not need love. The Gospel describes the time when we do not need exhortation in the words of the writer of the book of Hebrews, "*For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel. After those days, says the Lord, I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbour, and none his brother saying, 'Know the Lord', for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest*" (Hebrews 8:10-11).

3. Love is greater than faith and miracles

"Though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2b).

In 10th century AD in Egypt, during the Fatimid reign, a Jewish leader went to the Caliph saying, "It is written in the Gospel of the Christians that if someone has faith like a mustard seed, he can move a mountain." So the Fatimid Caliph al-Aziz Billah challenged the Egyptian Patriarch and asked him if it was true that this verse was found in the Gospel. When the Patriarch confirmed that it was found in Matthew 21:22, the Caliph asked the Patriarch to move Mount Moqattam. God heard the prayer of faith and He moved the mountain! The results were great.

There is intellectual faith which knows what is written in the Bible, which knows how to answer difficult religious questions, and which knows how to solve problems of interpretation. However, it is the faith of a knowledgeable mind, not the faith of a serene heart. It is like the faith of the unclean spirits who believe and shudder, but do not undergo any change (James 2:19).

Love is greater than miracle-working faith. Faith performs a great miracle (as, for instance, moving Mount Moqattam) once in every age, whereas love is in action every day. That is why love is greater than faith.

The apostle Paul does not diminish the importance of faith, nor does he reduce the value of a miracle, but he reminds us that love is indispensable and necessary every day. Faith that moves mountains causes astonishment, but love breaks a hard heart. A person may be astonished without believing, just like the Jewish elders were astonished at the raising of Lazarus after he had been dead for four days and could not deny that Christ had performed the miracle. But it only made them think about how they could kill Lazarus in order to do away with the proof of Christ's power and authority! So a miracle does not move the heart which has been dazzled by it, but it helps the heart which loves God and increases its faith!

In Exodus 7:11-12 we read about how Moses threw his rod down and it turned into a snake. However, the Egyptian sorcerers also threw their sticks down and they turned into snakes. This was a miracle. In verses 20-22 we read about how Moses changed water into blood and how the sorcerers imitated him. The difference between Moses' miracle and that of the sorcerers is that love was evident in Moses' miracle because it proclaimed God's concern for His people. As for Pharaoh's sorcerers, they performed

their miracle in order to destroy Moses, to extinguish the proof of God, because their hearts, devoid of love wanted to keep their slaves. As for God's miracle, it is one which sets the captive free. How big the difference between the two! To people like Pharaoh's sorcerers, Christ says, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness'"* (Matthew 7:21-23).

4. Love is greater than zeal and fervour

"Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3).

Many people give without love. They are motivated by pride in themselves and a desire to receive praise from others. A man may also give out of a sense of obligation. How great, however, is the difference between something given out of vanity or compulsion and something given out of love! In Mark 12:41-44 we read, *"Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Him, and said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury: for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had, her whole livelihood.'"* For the Lord sees how and in which spirit the gift is given, and He only appreciates true giving, giving out of love.

"Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor" - without having love, may benefit the poor but the giver himself will receive nothing from God!

"Though I give my body to be burned" – there are people who do surrender their bodies to the flames, for the love of God, as Nebuchadnezzar saw the three young men do, saying, *"Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king's words and yielded their bodies that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own"* (Daniel 3:28). For the Lord saved the bodies of the three young men from the fire because they had surrendered them for the love of God. There are others, however, who surrender their bodies to be burned because they hate people, like some of the crusaders who died. They were burned alive while they were killing and shedding blood. Although Christ's weapon was *"the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"* (Ephesians 6:17) they used the other type of sword disregarding what Christ had said, *"... all who take the sword will perish by the sword"* (Matthew 26:52).

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, the apostle Paul has taught us that love is the greatest of all gifts. It is greater than prophecy, teaching, faith, miracles, zeal and fervour.

Our primary spiritual problem is our lack of order in our priorities. Our first priority should be love, then gifts, prophecy, and knowledge, and after these faith and miracles, followed by zeal and fervour.

May God teach us to love, not only those who love us, but also those who do evil against us, as Christ loved us and surrendered Himself for our sakes.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, you have taught us love in your word and in Christ, because you are love. You have loved us when we were enemies, because when we were still sinners, Christ died for us. By the virtue of His atonement you forgave all our sins and made us fellow heirs with Christ. We ask you to make our life a life of love so that we may love with all our heart and mind, and love in the way you love. In Christ's name we pray. Amen

Chapter 2

"Love suffers Long and is Kind"

(1 Corinthians 13:4)

Now we have seen the importance of love. Let us then consider how love is described in verses 4-7. The apostle Paul names fifteen adjectives for love. In this chapter we will consider the first two of them.

- a) Love suffers long. This means that it is patient and has great perseverance, is slow to anger, does not cut off relationships with others and repeatedly gives new chances to everyone, even those who do evil against it.
- b) Love is kind. This is because it is gentle. The original Greek word means "sweet to everyone".

God has given us the most sublime example of patience and kindness. For when our original parents fell into transgression, God came to them stretching out a loving hand, but then Adam said to God, *"I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself"* (Genesis 3:10). Adam cast the blame on Eve. Eve in turn cast it on the serpent. Nevertheless, God in His love ordained salvation and atonement for our original parents. He gave them the mighty promise that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). Afterwards God covered them with garments made out of animal skins. How great God's love is! It is patient and kind for it promised that the Saviour would come, then it covered their shame. Later, it gave the Law of Moses with its animal sacrifices, which symbolised the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and who entered the Most Holy Place once for all and obtained eternal redemption for us (John 1:27, Hebrews 9:12).

God could have put an end to Adam and made a new beginning, creating another man, but God in His kindness and patience gave Adam a second chance.

We see God's patience and kindness clearly all through the history of the children of Israel in that He sent them prophets again and again, teaching them lesson after lesson although they repeatedly committed the same sin. In the story of the life of the prophet Hosea we see God training His prophet to have the same feelings as God Himself toward His people. Just as God had a relationship with a fallen people, He asked Hosea to marry a fallen woman. The fallen woman, however, fell again. When she first fell, her value diminished, and when she fell repeatedly, she lost her value completely. But, God asked Hosea to take her back again anyway, because He wanted to tell Hosea and all the people that He loved His people in spite of all their sins. God said, *"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son. As they called them, so they went from them; they sacrificed to the Baals and burned incense to carved images. I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by their arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them"* (Hosea 11:1-4).

In spite of the sin of the people and their faithlessness towards God, He expresses His love and fatherly sentiments to them, as the One who teaches them to walk step by step and who hands them food! Then He says, "*How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim?*" (Hosea 11:8) or, How can I destroy your land (in spite of your sins) so that you will become like Admah and Zeboiim? These are two cities in the vicinity of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 10:19), which God destroyed by fire because of their sins. God continues, "*My heart churns within Me, My sympathy is stirred!*" For the Lord cannot bear to destroy them because His love causes Him to have patience with them and be gentle towards them.

We see the same patient and kind love in the way Christ dealt with His disciples, whom He loved and taught and who walked with Him for three years. However, at His crucifixion, they all became afraid and ran away. Nevertheless, Christ told the two Marys after His resurrection, "*Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me*" (Matthew 28:10).

Christ elucidates the patience of love in the parable of the fig tree which would not yield any fruit. Its owner said to the man who took care of the land, "*For three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and found none. Cut it down. Why does it use up the ground?*" He answered and said to him, "*Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig round it and fertilise it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down*" (Luke 13:7-9)

This divine patience and kindness we experience clearly in our own daily lives, for God blesses us and shows us mercy although we sin, fall away from Him and grumble against Him. But He loves us with His perfect love in spite of our weaknesses. This urges us to live a life of love which is patient and kind to all as "*followers of God, as dear children*" (Ephesians 5:1).

Let us look at how we can live a life of love by seeing:

I. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LONGSUFFERING AND KINDNESS

1. Love which suffers long and is kind, is patient without despairing

Love which suffers long and is kind, is patient and does not lose its hope. It gives a second chance to others, as God always gives us a second chance when we miss a chance or misbehave.

When a believer falls and makes a mistake, he knows that God loves him and turns a new page for him, for He says, "*Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to Me. I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against Him until He pleads my case and executes justice for me; He will bring me forth to the light, and I will see His righteousness*" (Micah 7:8-9). For the Lord brings the believer into the light and shows him heavenly righteousness. As God treats the fallen believer in this loving way, He motivates the believer to deal with others as the Lord dealt with him.

Christ was kind toward His disciple Thomas, who doubted the reality of the resurrection, saying, "*Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.*" So Christ showed Himself to His disciples, including Thomas, and told him, *'Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.'* Then Thomas exclaimed, *'My Lord and my God!'*" (John 20:24-28)

2. Love which suffers long and is kind, will continue to exist and never cease

Love which suffers long and is kind will never cease, for it continues to give even though people do evil again and again.

When Absalom staged his failed coup against his father, King David, the children of Israel split into two camps; one was for Absalom and another was for David. But David's patient love for his son made him command his followers to be kind and gentle to the young man Absalom (2 Samuel 18:5). He saw a 'young man', an inexperienced boy, in his son who was rebellious against him, so he felt pity for him and for what he had done! And when David heard that his son had been killed, he cried in agony, "*O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! – if only I had died in your place!*" (2 Samuel 18:33).

A certain young man committed many crimes and ended up in prison. His mother would always go to see him in prison, and take so many gifts to him that she became indebted and her health began to deteriorate. She continued to do this although he would greet her with abuse every time she came to visit. A neighbour advised the mother to stop visiting her son, because she was exhausted and never received any appreciation from her son. But she told her neighbour, "It is true that he never appreciates what I do, but I love him. He only has one mother, who only has a short time to live!" This is a mother's love, and it will remain, because it is the love which is patient, kind and longsuffering, capable of giving without stopping because its source is in heaven.

3. Love which suffers long and is kind, preserves the inner peace of the one who has it

Love suffers long and is kind, even in the midst of trouble and pain. It fills the heart of the one who has this kind of love with deep peace from God, who says, "*In your patience you will possess your souls*" (Luke 21:19). It is true that love benefits those whom we love, but before that it benefits those of us who love because by loving patiently we shall save ourselves.

4. Love which suffers long and is kind, will meet with obstacles

There is a sound piece of advice which says, "Do not expect much from people in order that your hope may not be disappointed. See to it, however, that people who expect good things from you, will not be disappointed." Only kind love can execute

this command, because it is a well spring gushing forth in an abundance drawn from everlasting sources which never run dry, the river of redeeming, boundless love.

The one who has patient love does not stop loving, even if people strike a blow at it. Such a one behaves like Christ, who healed the ear of Malchus although Malchus came to arrest Him. Instead, Christ did well towards Malchus and healed his ear.

The apostle Paul told the pastors of the church of Ephesus, "*Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with His own blood. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears*" (Acts 20:28, 31).

II. OBJECTIONS TO LONGSUFFERING AND KINDNESS

Many people complain about their spouse, their children, their boss at work, their business partner or their neighbour and when you advise them not to return evil for evil, they object.

Here are three objections to longsuffering and kindness, and some answers to those objections.

- a) One objection goes like this: "The evil done to me is extremely serious. They have hurt me a lot, and I cannot be longsuffering or kind because I have been deeply wounded." To this person we recommend three things:
 - What the evil people have done to you cannot possibly be greater than the evil you have done towards the Lord and other people. Even so, the Lord puts up with you. We usually forget the evil we do to others, while we remember the evil others do to us. We must remember the apostolic advice, "*Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you*" (Ephesians 4:32).

In the Lord's Prayer and Christ's comment on it, we have something which will help us to love patiently and kindly. For Christ taught us to pray, "*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*" (Matthew 6:12). Christ then expounded this and said, "*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Matthew 6:14-15).

Christ has suffered long with evil-doers and with those who have suffered evil. So let us be longsuffering as the Lord has suffered long with us. Let us pray that the Lord will treat the ones who do evil against us with the same longsuffering with which He has treated us.

- We can also advise the one who says that he has been seriously hurt that Christ bears the evil perpetrated against us, together with us. The proof of this is that when Saul of Tarsus reached out to do evil against the believers, Christ said to

him, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*" (Acts 9:4-5). We also read in the prophecy of Zechariah, "*He who touches you touches the apple of His eye*" (Zechariah 2:8), which means that he who does evil against us, does evil against God. For Christ suffers with us when we suffer. God says through the prophet Isaiah, "*In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them. In His love and in His pity He redeemed them, and He bore them and carried them all the days of old*" (Isaiah 63:9).

Christ called you to carry His simple, easy yoke, the yoke of obeying His commandments. If you carry Christ's yoke in obedience to His command, "*Take my yoke upon you*" (Matthew 11:29), He will carry the yoke with you!

- The third advice to the one who says that he has been seriously hurt is Christ's word, "*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (Revelation 2:10). It is true that the wrong suffered is serious, but our faithfulness towards the Lord makes us longsuffering and helps us love patiently and kindly, so that we may be worthy of the name "faithful until death" and gain "the crown of life".
- b) The one who puts forward the second objection says: "The evil-doers never seem to stop inflicting injury upon me and they do not repent, and it is apparent that they will not change their attitude toward me".

The question is: Are their evil deeds caused by some wrongdoing on the part of the one who objects, or by the mere fact that they are evil-doers? Let us listen to the apostle Peter's advice:

"Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable if, because of conscience toward God, one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps, 'Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth,' who when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness" (1 Peter 2:18-24).

Let us examine ourselves. Do we suffer because of a sin we have committed? If this is the case, let us repent before the Lord so that He will show mercy to us, "*for He will abundantly pardon*" (Isaiah 55:7). If however you suffer while doing good, you are blessed. I hope that you will keep looking steadfastly at Christ, who suffered while He served, sought and saved what was lost, so that you may be like Him and He may grant you a way out.

c) The one who raises the third objection says, "If I would show them patience and kindness, they would increase their harassments and evil deeds." To this person we will answer:

- How do you know that your enemies will harass you even more tomorrow? None of us can foretell what tomorrow will bring, for tomorrow is in God's hands. *"Tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble"* (Matthew 6:34). The Lord will intervene at the right time to change the harassment into good, as Joseph told his brothers, *"Am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good"* (Genesis 50:19-20).
- There is another truth. God always stands by those who obey His commandments. St. Augustine said, "Do the will of God as if it were your own, and God does your will as if it were His." When you obey God, He takes responsibility for everything which results from obedience to His commands. The apostle Paul commands us, *"Earnestly desire the best gifts. And now I will show you a more excellent way... Love suffers long and is kind."* So if we obey this blessed command, God will take responsibility for us, and blessing will always be upon the obedient.
- There is also a third truth. How great is the apostolic commandment! *"Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine. I will repay', says the Lord. Therefore, if your enemy hungers, feed him. If he thirsts, give him drink, for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"* (Romans 12:17-21).

Love which suffers long and is kind changes the life of the one who loves as well as the one who is loved. It brings the one who has gone far astray back to the house of the Father. As God's longsuffering and kind love leads you to open your heart to Christ the Saviour so that He in His love can rule over it as king, you should love the one who does evil against you in order to bring his soul back and lead it into the paths of righteousness.

PRAYER

O, Lord of patience and kindness, teach me to be longsuffering and kind as you are towards me. You bore with me until I opened my heart to you. Help me to bear with those who do evil against me, for your sake as well as for their sake, so that I may gain life by my endurance. Help me to have faith expressing itself through love. Forgive me for my grumbling and annoyance, and bring me to repent before you that I may love you and those whom you love, so that I may be a true disciple of Jesus. In His name, hear my prayer. Amen

Chapter 3

"Love does not Envy"
(1 Corinthians 13:4)

True faith is active, expressing itself through love. Faith without works is the faith of the evil spirits who believe and tremble (James 2:19). The fruit of true faith must appear in the life of the believer every day. As believers who love Jesus we must read the chapter of love often, more often than we have usually done, in order to grasp what the life of love is like, the life which the Lord wants us to live.

In this chapter let us consider the second attribute of love: *"Love does not envy"*.

Envy is the annoyance we feel towards a person who has something we do not have. It may be just a thought pattern, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, of regret at other people's success. Maybe this was the situation of the Corinthian believers. Some of those who had gifts may have looked down on the ones who had none, and those in turn may have looked in envy towards those who had gifts!

Envy, however, may develop into something more than simply a wrong way of thinking. It can lead to harming the one who is envied. A good example is what happened when Joseph's brothers saw Joseph wearing a coloured shirt, which was nicer than any they had. Their envy became so strong that they threw him into an empty water cistern and then sold him to the Ishmaelites.

Envy always harms the one who envies and destroys his peace of mind. The envious one concentrates on what others have and does not see what he himself has. Therefore he does not enjoy what is given to him by God's grace. This envious way of looking at things always makes a person miserable.

In a church in Padua in Italy there is a fresco representing envy. It was painted by the Italian artist Giotto, a friend of Dante. It represents envy as a person who has long ears so that he can hear all the bad rumours about others. His tongue is shaped like a snake so that he can poison the reputation of others. The tongue is also curled up so that the envious person can strike his own eyes! The artist wanted to illustrate that an envious person blinds himself so that he can no longer see what he has, and does evil against others.

Let us quote a verse from both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible forbidding us to envy: *"Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity"* (Psalm 37:1) and *"Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another"* (Galatians 5:26). So, let us not waste our time looking at what others have instead of thanking God for what He has given us.

It is strange for a believer to envy the non-believer for having material success. Asaph says: *"I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked"* (Psalm 73:3). This shows us that there is no human being who is sinless, and there is no life without temptations. Believers always have to be alert and watch out for the devil's

temptations in order not to fall into despicable sin like envy, so that they will be filled with God's peace and enjoy a sound spirit in the Lord.

Four things that help us deal with envy are:

1. Being thankful helps us to deal with envy, for love gives thanks, whereas envy grumbles.

When David had killed Goliath, the women of Israel cheered: "*Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.*" This annoyed King Saul, who said: "*They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me but thousands. Now what more can he have but the kingdom?*" (1 Samuel 18:7-8).

David did in fact kill tens of thousands, so the enemies fled leaving the people of God in peace for a long time. Saul did not even kill thousands, for the enemies stood still before him for forty days, mocking and ridiculing him and his God, and Saul could do nothing! The songs of praise were true as far as David was concerned and they honoured Saul more than necessary. Nevertheless, the envy in Saul's soul prevented him from being happy at the victory. The result of his envy was that he destroyed himself, for he left his palace, his throne and his royal sceptre to pursue David and to kill him. David was just a soldier in King Saul's army. The throne was Saul's, but he was so sick with envy in his heart that he always grumbled, destroying his own life and making his people miserable as he was trying in vain to destroy David. At last, Saul committed suicide and David became king. If Saul had been able to think logically, he would have considered David an instrument of God. He was a soldier among others and the Lord gave victory by his hands. But envy blinded Saul's eyes from the truth.

As a contrast to Saul we see David giving thanks. Love gives thanks and does not grumble. David says: "*Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits; who forgives all your iniquities; who heals all your diseases; who redeems your life from destruction; who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies; who satisfies your mouth with good things; so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's*" (Psalm 103:1-5). So let us shift our perspective from looking at what others have and give thanks for what we ourselves have. Then we shall always be at peace, protected from the sin of envy.

2. Considering what we have, helps us against envy, for love sees what it has, while envy sees what it is lacking.

In the book of Numbers we read about what befell Korah and some of the leaders of the Israelites when they envied Moses' and Aaron's ministry. "*Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men: and they rose up before Moses, with some of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, famous in the congregation, men of renown. And they gathered themselves together against Moses and Aaron and said to them, 'You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why*

then do you exalt yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?" (Numbers 16:1-3).

When we consider this complaint, we see that half of what they said was true, for the congregation was in fact holy because the Lord was in its midst. But the other half was wrong: "*Why then do you exalt yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?"* for God Himself had appointed Moses and Aaron as leaders of His people. They had not appointed themselves, for God had called them, installed them and sent them to Pharaoh. He used them to bless His people and release them from bondage. Korah and the other leaders ought to have been sensible enough to have given thanks for the blessing God had given them and their people through Moses and Aaron. However, the envy that filled their hearts put an end to their blessing, even to their lives, as the earth cracked open and swallowed them up with everything they had, so that they went down alive into hell (Numbers 16:31-33)!

The most striking example of envy is the envy which the Jewish leaders harboured against Christ. He came to be their Saviour, the One whom generations had been waiting for, fulfilling the prophecies. However, they refused to accept Him and turned Him over to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate to be crucified. After Pilate had investigated their accusations he knew that Christ was innocent and that they had handed Him over out of envy (Matthew 27:18). They were envious of Him because the people followed Him out of love for Him. The people expressed their confidence in Him by shouting, "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"* "Hosanna" means "Save, O Lord!" This is a prayer as well as an expression of joy and salutation at Christ's coming. The Jewish elders said to each other: "*You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!"* (John 12:19). They decided to kill Him but as they did not have the authority to carry it out, they sought Pilate's help.

It was a strange thing with them! They ought to have been overjoyed at Christ, the mighty teacher and miracle-worker, the awaited Messiah. But their hearts were devoid of love, filled with envy, and so they handed Him over to Pilate.

How big the difference between them and John the Baptist, who loved God and Christ and who witnessed that Christ was "the lamb of God". He led his disciples to follow Christ, saying about Him: "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:30). Truly, love does not envy.

3. Joy helps us against envy, for love rejoices in what is good, whereas envy is annoyed with it.

A splendid example of love rejoicing in what is good for others is the love of Jonathan, the son of king Saul, for David. When David had killed Goliath, "*Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan took off the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword and his bow and his belt*" (1 Samuel 18:3-4). When Saul envied David and wanted to kill him, Jonathan warned David of the plot and defended David before his father (1 Samuel 19:3; 20:32). Jonathan asked David to be kind to his offspring when he had come to power (1 Samuel 20:15). Jonathan really loved David and rejoiced at the

salvation God granted His people through David, even though it was against Jonathan's own interests.

Love rejoices at that which increases the common good because it knows that a man does not increase when others decrease. The book of Daniel tells us about the honour bestowed on Daniel during the reign of king Darius: "*It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred and twenty satraps, to be over the whole kingdom; and over these, three governors, of whom Daniel was one, that the satraps might give account to them, so that the king would suffer no loss. Then this Daniel distinguished himself above the governors and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him and the king gave thought to setting him over the whole realm. So the governors and satraps sought to find some charge against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find no charge or fault, because he was faithful; nor was there any error or fault found in him. Then these men said, 'We shall not find any charge against this Daniel unless we find it against him concerning the law of his God'*" (Daniel 6:1-5).

Did those leaders not know that Daniel's success was not his alone, but the whole country's and theirs as well? They ought to have been thankful for a prime minister so intelligent, virtuous and trustworthy that all the affairs of the state were conducted successfully and peacefully. But envy made them blind, so that they saw nothing in Daniel but the leader occupying an honourable position of responsibility which they reckoned themselves more worthy of. So they set up a plot against him. However, the Lord rescued him from it (Daniel 6).

4. Peace helps us against envy, for love lives in peace, while envy lives in anxiety.

When a man loves his God, he loves all of mankind as well. When people love, their hearts are filled with peace flowing from heaven like the peace that overflowed Christ's heart when He was on His way to the cross and said to His disciples: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid*" (John 14:27).

The one who envies, however, destroys his peace of mind, for he is always aspiring to what others have, neglecting to be thankful for what he alone has. How wise is the apostolic advice: "*Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection*" (Colossians 3:12-14).

Compare Joseph's peace of mind when he honoured his father and his brothers, with the anxiety raging in his brothers' hearts when they said to each other: "*We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us*" (Genesis 42:21). Compare also Joseph's peace of mind when he returned from his father's funeral, who had been shown full honour, and the anxiety of his brothers when they said: "*Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him*" (Genesis 50:15). These words show us that anxiety was latent within their

souls, giving their hearts no rest all the time they stayed in Egypt and their father was still alive.

Love gives peace, envy stirs up anxiety! So let us ask God to let His love dominate our hearts, His love which "does not envy".

PRAYER

Our Father, we thank you for giving and honouring us in abundance and for never letting us be put to shame. Grant us that we may see how you have opened your hand and satisfied us with good things. Make our hearts overflow with the joy of your Holy Spirit, that we may rejoice in you and your provision of gifts to us. Make your love grow in us. Take away all envy from within us, and grant that we may honour the fact that we belong to you by our life and our efforts, in order that we may live the life of the faith we profess. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Chapter 4

"Love Does not Parade itself, it is not Puffed Up"

(1 Corinthians 13:4)

Someone who has spiritual gifts is more exposed to the temptation of boasting about what he has. A famous preacher may boast about his preaching talents. Someone who does good deeds may be proud of giving food to the poor. But true, sincere love does not boast about what it does because it does it for the sake of Christ's name and by the power given by Christ.

Boasting was one of the faults of the church of Corinth, for its believers split into factions. Each one would boast about the apostle they claimed to be following. Some boasted about Paul, some about Apollos, but the apostle Paul told them: "... *that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other*" (meaning: Do not become puffed up with pride in belonging to any special group). "*For who makes you differ from another?*" (Meaning: Who made you different from others?) "*And what do you have that you did not receive?*" (Meaning: Everything you possess is a gift.) "*Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?*" (1 Corinthians 4:6-7). So the apostle asks his hearers to side neither with himself nor with Apollos, for none of them possesses anything or is special in any way. If they possess anything or are special it is by God's grace, it is a gift from Him, and it is nothing earned by personal merit.

The apostle Paul also says: "*Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies*" (1 Corinthians 8:1). A person who knows many things may be puffed up by his knowledge, but he does not grow in stature before God or man by what he has learned except when love rises like the sun to illuminate his heart.

Why did Paul not say, "love is humble" instead of "*love does not parade itself, it is not puffed up*"? Why did he not describe love positively instead of negatively? Maybe the Corinthians were boasting about their humility, turning this virtue into the vice of pride.

There are two great commandments which sum up all other commandments: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself.*" If you love God with all your heart you cannot possibly boast or grow proud, because you will understand that all you have is from God, the source of all grace. If you love all of humanity you cannot possibly become puffed up against them. Instead, you will stand with them in humility because you are the servant of God, the lover of mankind, who gives of Himself and what He has. He is represented by Christ who did not come to be served but to serve and give Himself up as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

There are three reasons why love does not parade itself:

1. Love understands that parading itself is living according to the flesh

We may live the "life of the flesh" or the "life of the Spirit". The flesh fights against the Spirit and resists it so strongly that we do what we do not want to do. Therefore, the apostle instructs us to "*walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh*" (Galatians 5:16). So we see that love does not boast because the Holy Spirit controls it, as the apostle Paul says: "*Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, set their minds on the things of the Spirit*" (Romans 8:5). This love, which is subjected to the Holy Spirit, does not behave according to the flesh, which parades itself.

- The flesh was behind King Nebuchadnezzar's behaviour. The king said: "*Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honour of my majesty?*" (Daniel 4:30). It was not Nebuchadnezzar himself who built Babylon and he did not pay the building expenses out of his own pocket, but he enjoyed the fruits of the efforts of the people who paid tribute and the drawings, foundations and building works undertaken by the well-qualified architects and engineers.
- The flesh was also behind the behaviour of Salome, the mother of John and James, the two sons of Zebedee, for she asked Christ: "*Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your kingdom*" (Matthew 20:21). The Lord did not grant her request, however, the ten disciples became indignant at the two disciples as though Christ had actually granted what she had requested! In her request and the disciples' indignation we see how proud Salome was of her two sons, and how proud and conceited the other disciples were, as they must have reckoned themselves to be greater than the two sons of Zebedee! Perhaps each one of them was thinking: "Now, if John and James sit at His right and His left, where will I sit?!" Christ asked them: "*Can you go through the baptism I am going to go through?*" Jesus' baptism meant that His whole life was one of humility and love, and this is the life He intends for us when we are baptised, because He is gentle and humble in heart.
- The flesh was also behind the dispute between the disciples as to which of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24). They thought that the kingdom of Christ was a political, earthly one. However, Christ corrected this way of thinking, which belongs to sinful nature, telling them: "*He who is greatest among you let him be like the younger, and he who governs as he who serves... I am among you as the One who serves*" (Luke 22:26-27).

It is clear that mankind according to its usual way of thinking tends towards boasting and pride. People glory in their families, considering them to be the best in the world, and in themselves, considering themselves to be the best of the family members! Love, on the other hand, is a heavenly lifestyle, therefore it does not boast nor is it proud.

The people of God were tempted to boast after the Exodus, so the Lord warned them, saying: "*The LORD did not set His love on you and choose you because you were*

more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments" (Deuteronomy 7:7-9).

God chose His people because they were smaller than the other nations, in order to safeguard their humility. Therefore, Moses forbade them to boast and commanded them to be humble, teaching them to say: *"My father was a Syrian, about to perish, and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. But the Egyptians mistreated us, afflicted us, and laid hard bondage on us. Then we cried out to the LORD God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and looked on our affliction and our labour and our oppression"* (Deuteronomy 26:5-7).

Abraham did wander and he came to Egypt seeking refuge there. God protected him and his family while he was in Egypt and blessed him greatly. When Abraham left Egypt, he was very rich in cattle, silver and gold and he went to the place of the altar and called on the name of the Lord (Genesis 12:10-20 to 13:1-4). He did not boast in his wealth but recognised that God had blessed him. This restrains believers who value Christ's grace from boasting.

God repeated His warning to His people against boasting by the words of the prophet Isaiah: *"Listen to me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD: look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug"* (Isaiah 51:1). By "the rock" He means Abraham, the friend of God, and by "the hole of the pit" He means Sarah. For Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah 89 when she became pregnant with Isaac. She had no hope of childbearing at her age, but against all human hope, God fulfilled His promise to His friend Abraham (Romans 4:18). Thus Isaiah said that God cut a people from "the rock" and "the hole of the pit". So there is no place for pride here, only for humility before God who works such miracles that Abraham *"was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God"* (Romans 4:20).

Christ also warned Peter from being over confident when He told him that he would deny Him three times (Luke 22:24).

Christ must have had a feeling that His disciples would be tempted to boast that He had chosen them to be His disciples, for He told them: *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain"* (John 15:16). This means that the merit is for the grace which grafted the branch to the vine and nourished it with its generous sap so that it bore fruit. We notice that the branch which does not bear fruit raises its head, whereas the branch which does bear fruit bows down because of the weight of the fruit. Those that boast are those that bear little fruit!

2. Love understands the merit of Him who gave it, therefore it does not wax proud

Man's nature is sinful and he was formed from the dust of the earth. Man is also spirit, a breath from God. Dust cannot grow proud, because when it breathes its last it returns to dust. So let us repeat with the apostle Paul: "*If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's*" (Romans 14:8). For loving the Lord makes us understand that we live and move and have our being in Him (Acts 17:28), so that we return the credit to Him to whom it belongs and offer glory to Him who alone is worthy of glory.

We ought to appreciate ourselves correctly, as the apostle Paul said: "*For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith*" (Romans 12:3).

Two good examples of people who thought soberly of themselves are Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes and David the psalmist. Jacob said to God: "*I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, but now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him lest he come and attack me*" (Genesis 32:10-11). Jacob acknowledged that when he had crossed the Jordan River, he had nothing but his staff, but when he came back, he had two companies with him, and the credit goes back to God. However, the two companies might be lost in a moment and taken or killed by Esau. So Jacob acknowledges his unworthiness and need of God's help.

The prophet of God, David, also prayed: "Who am I, O Lord GOD? And what is my house, that you have brought me this far? And yet this was a small thing in Your sight, O Lord GOD; and You have also spoken of Your servant's house for a great while to come. Is this the manner of man, O Lord GOD? Now what more can David say to You? For You, Lord GOD, know your servant. For Your word's sake, and according to Your own heart, You have done these great things, to make Your servant know them. Therefore You are great, O Lord GOD. For there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears" (2 Samuel 7:18-22). David acknowledges that he used to be a mere shepherd whom God had made king. For love does not boast, as it acknowledges the merit of Him who gave the gift.

The first beatitude says: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:3). They are the ones who understand by the Spirit that what they have is not earned by any merit on their part but it is a free gift from the Lord.

3. Love understands the limitations of its gifts

How can we boast and become proud when we know that our love of God and our service to Him are nothing compared to His love for us and the blessings He grants us? How can we boast and become proud when we know that we are negligent about God's rights and people's rights? Therefore Christ says: "*So, likewise, you, when you*

have done all those things which you were commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have done what was our duty to do'" (Luke 17:10).

No one can do everything he ought to do according to his beliefs. Even if he could, he must confess that he is nothing but an unworthy servant who has done nothing worth mentioning, and that would be a correct statement, not false humility. For all of our financial contributions come from what God gives us, and all the work we undertake we can only do by the health and energy God gives us. Everything we have is from His grace towards us, a gratuitous gift from God, to whom be all glory. Every time our love for God increases, we increase in grace, and every time we advance in grace we discover that our standard is lower than the divine standard demanded from us, which is "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ". So let us strive and not give up. There is never any place for pride. There is only place for running towards the goal, struggling against sin, resisting to the point of shedding our own blood (Hebrews 12:4). The Gospel tells us about a centurion who did good deeds, but who saw that he only did his duty. So he did not boast but humbled himself, because his heart was overflowing with love for God and His people. The Jewish elders told Jesus "*that the one for whom He should do this was worthy, 'for he loves our nation and has built us a synagogue'" (Luke 7:4-5). He himself, however, said to Christ: "I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof" (Luke 7:6). Love understands the limitations of what it gives, so it does not boast nor does it become proud.*

Let us bow down before God in a spirit of humility, aware of our sins and shortcomings, and let us then partake of his unlimited love, which is like an ocean overflowing with grace. And let us strive so that His name is exalted and the earth is filled with His glory.

PRAYER

Lord, teach me the love that does not boast and does not become proud, for what do I have which does not come from your generous hand? I thank you for graciously choosing me, which is something you have done solely because it pleased you to do so. Teach me by the example of Christ, the most exalted example of love and humility, who said: "*For I am gentle and lowly in heart,*" and who submitted Himself and was obedient unto death, the death on the cross. Grant me humility and gentleness of heart. Remove from my heart all traces of boasting, pride and conceit. Grant that I may walk in the steps of our dear, beloved Saviour. Hear me, in His name, I pray. Amen.

Chapter 5

"Love does not Behave Rudely"
(I Corinthians 13:5)

Rudeness is contrary to the will of God. When He created the world "*God saw that it was good... very good*" (Genesis 1:4,12,18,21,25). When He had completed creation, including man, "*God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good*" (verse 31). Good is God's will, whereas rudeness came into creation with sin. When the apostle Paul says, "*Love does not behave rudely*" he means that it is the fundamental attribute which would have remained had sin not come into the world.

In His love, God had prepared everything good for Adam before He created him, and everything was good, the lights, the trees, the birds, the fish and the animals. Last of all, God created man to enjoy all of this. And when God saw that Adam was alone, He gave him his wife Eve to be his helpmate. As soon as he saw her, Adam wrote the first poem in history, a love song. Adam said, "*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man*" (Genesis 2:23).

As soon as sin came into the world, however, it was accompanied by antipathy, fear and rudeness, and, lo and behold, Adam, the author of love poems, put the blame on his beloved wife Eve, and even on God Himself, saying to Him: "*The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate*" (Genesis 3:12)! How did love change into antipathy? How did thanksgiving to God change into grumbling?

The most striking illustration of the rudeness of sin is what sin did to Christ. The Psalmist described Christ by the spirit of prophecy, saying, "*You are fairer than the sons of men; grace is poured upon Your lips*" (Psalm 45:2). The prophet Isaiah though, describes Him differently altogether, saying, "*For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him*" (Isaiah 53:2-3). How does this most excellent of men come to be described in these gloomy, sorrowful terms? The answer is that He bore all of our sins. Such is the rudeness of sin that it deforms everything. And Christ bore all this rudeness in order to restore all the good to us which we had deformed, to fulfil the words of David: "*He will beautify the humble with salvation*" (Psalm 149:4). Martin Luther expresses the same reality in his words to Christ: "My Lord Christ, you became what you never were in order to make me what I never was."

There are two ways in which love does not behave rudely:

1. Love does not behave rudely in words

The apostle Paul speaks about how believers should behave in love, saying, "*Therefore, be followers of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has*

loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God. But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks" (Ephesians 5: I-4).

Foolish talking and coarse jesting are rude and obscene and not only should these things not be practised, nor should they be mentioned, "*let it not even be named among you*". For when a person addresses someone else in an improper manner, he distorts the other's image in front of people, and moreover, he disgraces himself as well! The tongue which is controlled by the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, speaks nothing but blessings to others. Foolish talking and coarse jesting which is improper is usually scornful towards others, because they are different in the way they speak, look or dress or because of what they know or don't know. This is always a behaviour which has nothing to do with love, for someone who mocks and jokes makes himself and his friends laugh at the expense of the dignity of someone else, because he ridicules that which he considers to be a point of weakness in the other.

The apostle Paul gives this advice to the Colossians: "*But now you must also put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man, who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him*" (Colossians 3:8-10). God has changed us and renewed us to be in accordance with the image of the loving Creator, who has encouraged all people.

There is a fantastic discourse on the tongue in the letter of James, the letter of practical life: "*If any one does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body... For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceeds blessing and cursing... Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grape vine, bear figs? Thus no spring can yield both salt water and fresh*" (James 3:2, 7-12)

In the natural world we do not find a spring that gives both fresh and salt water at the same time, and neither an olive tree nor a grape vine can produce figs. But one and the same tongue (sadly enough) produces contradictory statements! One and the same mouth blesses God and curses people. The apostle James comments on this by saying, "*My brethren, these things ought not to be so*" (verse 10). For love does not speak rudely but always speaks words of encouragement, and it reproaches in order to build up and restore, but never in a rude manner. So if we would apply this rule to how we speak at home, what would we find? Usually we speak nicely when we are not at home and pull ourselves together when we receive visitors but we usually release our tempers when alone with our families as though we had spent all our funds of love outside, having nothing left for our families but grumbling, reproaches and coarse talking! We behave like this although we have endless funds of wisdom, grace and sweet words with God, from which we can take all we and our community need!

Here are two examples of encouraging words from the Old Testament, one from a virtuous wife and the other from a virtuous husband, both of whom give words of encouragement to their spouse.

The first example is about Manoah's wife. The angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah's wife, who was sterile, declaring to her that she would bear a son (who would be the judge, Samson), whom God would make to be the saviour of His people. She told her husband about this. Manoah prayed for the angel to reappear. God answered his prayer and the angel appeared a second time to his wife, who hurried to tell Manoah. They both spoke with the angel about the son they were going to have and his future. After that, the angel left and returned to heaven in the flame of the altar of burnt offerings. Some time passed when the angel did not appear, so Manoah became afraid and said to his wife: "*We shall surely die, because we have seen God!*" But his wife reassured him, saying, "*If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor would He have shown us all these things, nor would He have told us such things as these at this time*" (Judges 13:21-23). How beautiful are the words of this wife! She did not mock her husband for not understanding, but reassured and encouraged him, giving him supporting evidence that God had accepted their offerings and spoken to them. In her love, she neither behaved rudely nor scolded her weak, fearful husband. She behaved according to the apostolic advice: "*Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers*" (Ephesians 4:29).

The other example is about a husband who encourages his wife. Hannah was sterile. This was not due to any defect of Elkanah's, her husband, for Penina, Elkanah's other wife, had children with Elkanah. Hannah was crying and praying, asking God to give her offspring. Years went by without any answer to these prayers, but in the midst of her suffering, her virtuous husband was encouraging her, saying: "*Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart grieved? Am I not better to you than ten sons?*" (1 Samuel 1:8). God then did show His generosity to Hannah and Elkanah by granting them offspring, the first of whom was Samuel, who became a judge and a prophet of Israel.

2. Love is not rude in practice

When God's Spirit controls our lives, He gives us blessed fruit, the first of which is love (Galatians 5:22). The apostle Paul says: "*For the fruit of the Spirit consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth, proving what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all those things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says: 'Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light'*" (Ephesians 5:9-14). There are evil deeds done by the believer before he comes to know Christ. It is improper for him to keep doing them after he has risen from his death of sin and Christ's light has shone on him, because "*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*" (2 Corinthians 5:17). So rudeness no longer has a place in the life of the believer - or so it ought to be.

How often we see ugliness and rudeness swallowing beauty around us. But the final victory is for love, because it does not behave rudely.

Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, saw in a dream seven cows coming up out of the river, fine looking and fat. They grazed in the meadow. Then seven other cows came up after them from the river, ugly and gaunt, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the river. The ugly gaunt cows ate up the seven fine looking and fat cows (Genesis 41:2-4).

What Pharaoh saw happens to us today. We see ugliness eating up the beautiful. We may have a fine friend, with whom we have enjoyed a long, rewarding relationship, but one mistake may destroy this friendship. We then forget the fine days and remember the one fault. You spend your days doing good, and one mistake wipes out all the goodness. Ugliness eats up beauty.

Only love that does not behave rudely conquers ugliness and stands by the fine people and things of life. Love is like Moses' rod. When Moses cast down his rod before Pharaoh it became a serpent. The magicians of Egypt did likewise. But Moses' rod swallowed up their rods (Exodus 7:10-12). The rod of truth swallowed up the rods of falseness and rudeness.

The grace of Christ performs a miracle of beauty in us when we accept it. It demolishes the rudeness of sin. One of the meanings of the word "grace" is "the beauty of life." Jesus bestows beauty of life on those who accept His salvation.

When Jesus was on trial, He heard Peter's triple denial. These were words of rudeness. What was the reaction of Jesus? Luke says, "*The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord... And he went outside and wept bitterly*" (Luke 22:61-62). Jesus' look at Peter was not a look of rebuke, sarcasm or gloating. It must have been full of love and sympathy. This is why it broke Peter's heart and caused him to repent. After Jesus rose from the dead He gave Peter and his colleagues a great catch of fish after a long night of fruitless fishing. Then Jesus asked Peter, "*Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?*" In embarrassment Peter answered, "*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you*" (John 21:3-17).

The love of Jesus healed Peter's denial. It inspired him to follow Jesus. It motivated him to a life of piety.

PRAYER

Forgive us, Father, for the rude words that our lips spoke which hurt the feelings of others, and disturbed our consciences. Bless us in our homes and in our relationships with our families and neighbours. Help us to love all those with whom we deal. Help us to speak edifying words to them. Even when they make mistakes help us to treat them the way Jesus treated Peter who denied Him, so that we will walk in the steps of our beloved Saviour who inspires us to follow Him, and encourages us to live the life of piety.

We are weak and you are our strength. Control us with your Spirit so we can obey and live the life of love which does not behave rudely and never fails.

Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. In Christ's name. Amen.

Chapter 6

"Love does not Seek its Own"

(1 Corinthians 13:5)

"*Love does not seek its own*" means that love seeks that which is in the interest of others. This is a virtue which no human being can have enough of without being born of God or without being possessed by the Holy Spirit. For that which is born of flesh is flesh and is concerned with its own, whereas that which is born of the Spirit is concerned with the affairs of God and others.

When we listen to the teachings of the Bible, we are filled with despair, because we are unable to apply them. This happens, too, when we consider Christ's exemplary life, because we cannot follow in His footsteps. This despair is holy, important and blessed, because when we feel incompetent, we can seek refuge with God in His grace, confessing our bankruptcy. Then God will take charge of the matter instead of us, so that we may say with the apostle Paul: "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*" (Galatians 2:20). When this is the case, Christ lives these virtues out by His life in us, so that we can walk in His footsteps. If we stumble and fall, He raises us up. "*For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having now been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life*", i.e. His life in us (Romans 5:10).

"*Love does not seek its own*" because it seeks that of others! There is an old Jewish tradition stating that the place where Solomon's temple was built was a place where two brothers met, whose hearts were overflowing with love. The elder of the two was married and had children, whereas the younger one was unmarried. After the wheat harvest, the elder brother said to himself: "Now we have harvested the wheat, and I have one half of the crop and my brother has the other half. I will give him a sack of wheat from my portion in order that he can pay for his wedding expenses and build a new house." At the same time, the younger brother was thinking to himself that he would add a sack of wheat from his portion to that of his brother, because he was thinking about his married brother's responsibilities toward his wife and children. Both brothers did as they had thought in the middle of the night. When morning broke, each of them began to count what he had and found that nothing was missing. They did not understand why, so they repeated what they had done over a few nights. One night the two brothers met on the way, each of them carrying a sack of wheat to be given to his brother. So they embraced each other and cried, on each other's shoulder. In that place, the meeting place of love, the temple of Solomon was built.

On the evening of the Last Supper, Christ's disciples refused to wash each other's feet, so Christ got up from the meal, wrapped a towel around His waist and washed and dried their feet, and then He said to them: "*Do you know what I have done to you?... If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet*" (John 13:4-14).

God has loved us deeply and accepted us. He asks us to love our neighbour as much as He loves us and as we love ourselves. Likewise, God asks us to accept and forgive

ourselves as He forgives us. For if we forgive ourselves in the same way God forgives us, we can accept and forgive others. In this way we apply one of the greatest attributes of love and obey the apostolic command: "*Fulfil my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross*" (Philippians 2:2-8). So Christ is the most sublime model of love which thinks about that of others. May we have Christ's way of thinking, which accepts, blesses and forgives. For when we adopt Christ's way of thinking as our method, we can love with His love, so that we don't seek praise, happiness or benefit for ourselves, because we seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to us (Matthew 6:33).

1. Love seeks the others' good because it is merciful

The soul which enjoys God's mercy and forgiveness will be merciful and forgiving to others as a result, and will seek the others' good. Every time God's mercy enters into a human soul, mercy moves from that soul into others.

How beautiful are the words of the psalmist: "*The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the LORD upholds him with His hand. I have been young and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread. He is ever merciful, and lends; and his descendants are blessed*" (Psalm 37:23-26). Verses 23-25 speak about the love of the Lord and His support of the believer and how He satisfies him and his offspring with good things. The believer responds by showing mercy all day and lending, and his offspring will be a blessing because the Lord has already in the past shown mercy and kindness towards him.

The same thing which the psalmist describes in Psalm 37 is contained in the words of the apostle Paul: "*Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do*" (Colossians 3:12-13).

2. Love seeks the others' good because it is generous

Love is generous. It gives without expecting anything in return. We have many examples of this but there is one which may be difficult to apply today. It happened in the early church and is described in the book of the Acts of the Apostles: "*Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need*" (Acts 2:44-45). There was no one who was in need, because those who had, gave to those who did not have.

In chapter 4 of the same book, we read: *"Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need"* (Acts 4:33-35). The same chapter presents a person to be emulated, Joseph who was known as Barnabas, which means "a person who encourages others". He was a Levite from Cyprus and *"having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet"* (Acts 4:36-37).

This is an example of generous love, which gives all it has and gives in abundance. However, having all things in common in the church of Jerusalem did not continue, because it was a consuming, not a producing church. When its capital was used up, it was stricken with poverty. Therefore, the apostle Paul teaches us: *"If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat"* (2 Thessalonians 3:10). To the elders of the church of Ephesus, he says: *"You yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities and for those who were with me"* (Acts 20:34). Paul worked as a tent-maker to support himself and those who were with him.

The mutual love of the members of the first church was great, as they offered up all they had to God and each other. And as most of them expected Christ's second coming within their lifetime, they sold their belongings for the mutual benefit. However, no one can predict the time of Christ's second coming, so let us work and strive honestly, fulfilling the apostolic commandment: *"Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labour, working with his hands what is good, that he may have some thing to give him who has need"* (Ephesians 4:28).

So come, let us love our generous God, that we might be generous like Him, because *"He who sows to his flesh, will of the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith"* (Galatians 6:8-10). For the love you have received from God is a blessing and you have enjoyed divine generosity which does not seek its own good but that of others. And the one who is satisfied pours out on others from the generosity of heaven. *"Do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased"* (Hebrews 13:16).

3. Love does not seek its own because it seeks the spiritual good of others

The Lord seeks our spiritual good. He searches for us as the good shepherd searches for the one lost sheep until he finds it. This good shepherd never stops searching for you in order to restore your soul and lead you into the paths of righteousness for His name's sake (Psalm 23:3). *"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"* (Luke 19:10).

The most powerful example of love seeking that of others is the attitude of the apostle Paul towards the Jews who harassed and opposed him, who had previously crucified Christ and now wanted to stop the preaching of the Gospel. Even the Jews who accepted the message of Christ wanted to stop the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles. The apostle Paul expressed his feelings towards them saying: *"I tell you the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh"* (Romans 9:1-3). He was willing to be banned from salvation if this ban would lead to the conversion of the Jews and their salvation.

Have you sacrificed anything for the sake of Christ, something that led someone else to get to know Christ? Think of what Christ did for your sake and His sacrifice of Himself in order to save you, and hear Him ask you: And you, what have you suffered for my sake?

4. Love which does not seek its own, receives heavenly recompense

We all seek heavenly recompense, and our way to it is to serve others and seek their good. The best example of this is our mighty Saviour, who when *"being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"* (Philippians 2:8-11). For the one who seeks the others' good and not his own, and who honours others will be honoured by his heavenly Father as the Father honoured the Son, who gave Himself for sinful mankind.

Come, let us walk in the footsteps of Christ, to be the people of the right hand, to whom the King says: *"Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me"* (Matthew 25:34-36). The Lord credits every touch of good and love to your account, however humble and insignificant it may be. He gives it back to you with a great blessing, not only here on earth, but as an eternal inheritance prepared for you since the creation of the world! *"And whoever gives one of these little ones a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward"* (Matthew 10:42).

The apostle of love, Paul, presented a beautiful piece of advice to the elders of the church of Ephesus, ending with some words the Lord Jesus had spoken, but which were not recorded by any of the four evangelists: *"I have received no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities and for those who were with me. I have shown in every way, by labouring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'"* (Acts 20:33-36). Here, the apostle Paul commands us to love with the love which does not seek its own, working according to

Christ's word that giving is better than receiving. Christ presented an example of this when He gave Himself for us. Paul also presented an example, for he did not seek his own, either, but served and carried burdens for the needs of others. Therefore, the Lord blessed Paul. His teaching, inspired by God's Holy Spirit, remains a guideline for the believers to this day, and will remain until Christ's second coming, guiding them to know God's will for their lives and the lives of those around them.

PRAYER

O Lord, teach me to seek the good of my spouse, children, parents, neighbours and friends before seeking any good for myself. I thank you for giving me the example of not withholding your Son but giving Him for all of us. I thank you for the Son, praise be to Him, for giving us the example of giving Himself for us. Teach us not to seek our own but that of others, so that we may be worthy, through the mediation of your noble blood, to hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant." Let us obey the divine command and realise what awaits us in heaven. Hear us, we pray, in His name. Amen!

Chapter 7

"Love is not Provoked"
(1 Corinthians 13:5)

Anger is a natural emotion which God put into us to be practiced at the right time and place. However, there are some people who use this natural emotion in unsuitable situations. But love does not, as it is not easily provoked to anger.

When the apostle Paul visited Athens, the capital of civilisation at that time, *"his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols"* (Acts 17:16). This was holy anger. For how could those philosophers and great thinkers, the leading scientists of their day, fill their city with idols?! Some of them, when they had seen a miracle performed, even became confused about who this God was who had performed it so they set up an altar *"to the unknown God"* (Acts 17:23). They were wise in the things of their world, but ignorant about the other world. Therefore Paul became angry with them in his heart and he expressed it in words!

The anger which love does not practice is sinful anger, which we pray that God will uproot from us. For when we reach the new life in Christ and receive His salvation by repenting of the past, He forgives us. Our Saviour shields us for the rest of our lives from the blemishes of sin which so easily surround us, and He cleanses us from the old, corrupt nature, whose influence still makes itself felt in us. In this way, He rescues us from the authority of sin over us, and we become renewed in the spirit of our mind and are saved day after day from our sins. In this way, He sanctifies us and cleanses our hearts.

1. Sinful anger

There are two situations in which anger is sinful:

a) Anger without a reason.

Christ said in His Sermon on the Mount: *"Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment"* (Matthew 5:22). There are people who become angry rightfully and who thus fulfil the commandment saying, *"Be angry, and do not sin: Do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil"* (Ephesians 4:26-27). Then there are those who become angry at their brother without cause and who are subject to judgment at the heavenly court of justice, and perhaps at earthly courts as well. Maybe we get angry just because someone differs from us in opinion. Sometimes we get angry just because someone is working against our own petty interests, so we lose our temper and unseemly words pass our lips.

We may also become angry with the people who are closest and dearest to us, because we do not listen to what they say to defend themselves, or we do not give them a chance to defend their point of view. We may become angry with them because we ask them to follow us and our ideas, without question. Of the things that cause most pain to the soul are marital quarrels and fights between a father or a mother and their

children, which happen even though the children are the people who are dearest to their parents. However, this love is only emotional and instinctive. In this case it needs heavenly education and correction according to Christ's love.

b) Anger mixed with desire for revenge.

Paul says to the members of the church of Rome: "*Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay', says the Lord*" (Romans 12:19). We give place to anger by clearing the way for it to go away without becoming a storm that sweeps away everything! If we become angry at sin we do not take revenge, for it is sinful anger that has the tendency to take revenge on the person who has sinned.

The apostle Paul commands the Ephesians: "*Let all bitterness, wrath and anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you*" (Ephesians 4:31-32). For true love does not become angry for any reason unworthy of anger. So, if it becomes angry for a reason, which does deserve it, it will never resort to revenge.

2. The evils of sinful anger

a) Sinful anger makes man lose his peace and equilibrium.

When someone erupts in anger like a volcano, he destroys his equilibrium and his peace of mind. He is no longer capable of controlling his speech or his body. His words shoot out from him like projectiles wounding others and destroying his own inner peace. When he comes to himself after the revolt of anger, he rebukes himself. But he cannot take back the angry words which issued from him and spread everywhere. They have become like feathers taken by the wind to places he did not want and he does not know!

Solomon the Wise said: "*Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools*" (Ecclesiastes 7:9). Anger makes man lose his equilibrium, because his anger rests in his bosom and harms himself more than others. The most embarrassing thing for someone is when he gets angry and loses his temper with a loving person, and then all of a sudden the loving person forgives him. Many a believer loves the Lord and works to exalt His glory, but often loses his temper with another believer and speaks unseemly words just because of a difference in opinion or conflicting personal interests, and finds that "anger rests in the bosom of fools".

b) Sinful anger forfeits spiritual blessing.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ says: "*Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift*" (Matthew 5:23-24). In this heavenly command Christ places reconciliation above offering sacrifice. For the Lord accepts the sacrifice of a

loving heart and a pure soul, and He rejects the prayer and the sacrifice of the soul which gets angry!

When a father loses his temper with his son, he forfeits the force of his argument and hinders himself from persuading his son, because someone who gets angry does not think rationally. Anger has made him lose his sense of sound logic. Sound logic does not need anger in order to support its point of view. But when someone gets angry, he can no longer be a good example, and he distorts the image of Christ in him.

The Book of Proverbs presents a collection of great proverbs denouncing sinful anger. The wisest of the wise, Solomon, says: "*Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul*" (Proverbs 22:24-25). For an angry man excites people and forfeits his self-respect and that of others too.

c) Sinful anger makes a person forfeit his social esteem.

A sinfully angry person has a bad image in society. Solomon the Wise says: "*An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression*" (Proverbs 29:22). A person who begins by getting angry will lose his temper and sin, and when he comes back to his senses, he will commit sin after sin, and his image in his community will be marred.

3. How can we be victorious over sinful anger?

The Holy Spirit has given the believers spiritual gifts and grace to help them make progress in faith. How, then, can they lose the fruit of the Holy Spirit which are longsuffering or patience and restraint or self-control?!

We all fight our own spiritual battles and are eager to comprehend for what reason Christ came to us. There is no despair when we are with Christ. The Holy Spirit helps us all to keep our temper and control ourselves and live the life of love which "is not provoked" to anger.

We often need assurance that we are a new creation in Christ, because "*Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*" (Galatians 5:24). For these moral principles are not only morals, but the lifestyle of a new life in Christ. To those whose life has been changed we can apply the saying: "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*" (2 Corinthians 5:17). So we need a new nature when we want to have victory over anger, one, which lives for God controlled by His Holy Spirit. We must therefore give more of ourselves to the Holy Spirit, who is God's personality, and commit ourselves more to Him. When He possesses us, He also possesses our tempers and keeps us from getting angry.

There are four words of advice we can follow to be victorious over anger:

a) Let us learn humility, for we also have our faults.

We all sin, and we all like sheep have gone astray (Isaiah 53:6). We need God's grace in order to correct our way. We need His guidance in order to widen our perception. We need to put ourselves in the place of others in order to know that we are not better than others.

When you become angry at a person, remember that you have short-comings too, and that God and other believers have accepted you. So do the same towards the person with whom you get angry.

b) Let us not blow the sins of others out of proportion, nor the evil these sins have caused us.

We may become angry as a result of the sin of others, but we must assess the magnitude of the sin and the anger: Does the magnitude of the sin of others against us justify the magnitude of our anger? We must not put the sins of others under magnifying glasses which blow up their negative effects.

Of the great lessons which the apostle Paul teaches us, we must mention the lesson on forgiveness. When he had appealed his case to the high court in Rome, to Emperor Nero himself, he wrote about it to his disciple Timothy saying: "*At my first defence none stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. And I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen*" (2 Timothy 4:16-18). We might have expected that the apostle Paul would have rebuked the believers whom he had led to know Christ and for whose sakes he had undergone much suffering. They left him in the lurch when he most needed their psychological, emotional, moral and financial support. But listen to how nice his words are: "*May it not be charged against them.*" He praised the Lord for standing beside him and strengthening him in order that the message might be fully proclaimed and reach everybody. And that is not all, for he testified that God would deliver him in the future. The apostle Paul did not keep a record like so many do today! He did not hold anything against those who neglected his rights, but he did hold all to the glory of God!

c) Let us request that the sinner be excused.

When someone does evil against us, we may analyse his motives in a positive way, so let us ask as much as we can in order for him to be excused. We have a good example, the full stature of which we hope to attain, and He is the one who prays for those who did evil against Him even though He did the best that could ever be done towards them, saying: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do*" (Luke 23:34). This is what the apostle Paul proclaims: "*Had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*" (1 Corinthians 2:8). By the Lord's grace, let us refrain from quickly getting angry. Let us be slow to anger by the grace from God, so that we can analyse the motives that made others sin against us. "*Therefore, my beloved*

brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20).

d) Estimate the negative results of anger.

When a person comes to his senses again after he has revolted in anger, he regrets much of what he has said, and he will remember the Chinese proverb: "If you keep your mouth shut, you will keep the flies from getting into it." He will also remember: "Speaking is silver, silence is golden," as well as this verse of Arabic poetry: "I may have regretted silence once, but many are the times I have regretted speaking."

There is nothing impossible about the commandment. For when the commandment is there, there is enough grace to carry it out, because the Lord Himself is the source of the commandment as well as the source of grace. He knows what we need before we even ask for it.

PRAYER

Examine my soul, O God, and try my words and my relationships with others. Dominate my behaviour through your Holy Spirit. I thank you for treating me with indulgence in spite of all the evil I have done against your kingdom, my brothers and sisters, and myself. "Against you, you only, have I sinned".

When I lose my temper and become angry, control my tongue and give me your love. Remind me of how much you have forgiven me, so that I may also forgive, and how patient you have been with me so that I may also be patient with others. Help me not to become angry without reason, but to be victorious by your grace over all thoughtless anger and all bitterness, harmful as it is to myself and others as well as to your kingdom. Hear my prayer, in the name of Christ. Amen.

Chapter 8

"Love Thinks no Evil"

(1 Corinthians 13:5)

There is a difference between believing that others have wronged us and being sure that they have actually done so. This blessed saying, "*Love thinks no evil*", teaches us to verify things before we pass judgment, because merely assuming wrongdoing hurts others as well as ourselves. Love thinks no evil because it is patient and kind, so it does not rush to pass judgment, but rather gives itself time to verify things.

We have said above, that this canticle of love is set between two chapters which speak about those who have spiritual gifts, received gratuitously from the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul says to these people: You who have spiritual gifts, do not think evil against each other, for we all belong to each other as parts of the same body, members of the same one family, whose head is Christ. So do not pass judgment quickly, but be patient and kind to each other.

1. What does it mean to think evil?

To think evil is to interpret words and actions of others negatively and to judge them unfairly without having any evidence for evil intentions.

- a) This creates within us a negative attitude towards the person about whom we think evil. This attitude determines the way we deal with that person now and in the future! The evil image of that person remains stuck in our mind, unchanged, because we think evil about him.
- b) We expect evil from a person who we think evil about, as if we are wearing dark glasses whenever we look at this person. He may behave in the best way, but even so, we ascribe this to ulterior motives which are not known, but are always considered to be negative. As soon as a mishap occurs, this person's name comes to mind as being the person behind it, and we always foretell that he will react wrongly to any good work we do. The worst effect of this kind of case is that when the one who thinks evil becomes fanatical about it, he will very quickly need psychiatric treatment, because he will become sick expecting people to deceive him, to be greedy for his possessions, to steal from him and to undertake any evil act imaginable to do him harm!
- c) We let evil thoughts about others grow, interpreting their simple opinions as complicated. We colour their grey, still unclear opinions, black. The case grows even more evil, so that we end up interpreting their white opinions as black.

For these three deplorable reasons we need love which "*thinks no evil*", because it helps our spiritual, social and mental lives and gives us peace. The Bible is not just an eschatological book, although it does speak about Christ's second coming and eternal life, it is also a book of the here and now. It is for the present. It has to do with our daily life, with all that we must relate to, for ourselves and others.

2. Why do we think evil?

- Thinking evil is a mental attitude towards others. It may be a result of bad experiences in the past. For instance, you may have expected good from a person, but you were disappointed and your hope was dashed. When this happens, you begin to think evil of him, and your mind retains a bad image of him. It is as if you had taken a mental photograph of him. It remains fixed and unchanged, although life is a moving picture rather than a fixed photographic one! In the same way, evil thinking, based on an evil past, destroys the past for you. It destroys the present and the future for you as well! Perhaps someone who loves you now, will do evil to you later, and the one who has once done evil to you, may prove his love for you later. So let us be open towards others, knowing that life is moving, not standing still.
- Thinking evil may result from interpreting and judging attitudes too quickly. We need to give enough time for a logical analysis and to be sure about the sources of information we have received about these attitudes. We must have patience before passing judgment on him or her.
- Thinking evil may also result from listening to the opinions of others about persons with whom we have not dealt personally before, and accepting those opinions and judgments without scrutinising them first. Most often the opinions and judgments are negative, which creates a negative image of others in our mind, not because we have dealt with the persons in question, but just because we have heard negative things about them. In this way, the image of a person is destroyed in our minds, which tires us and makes us tire other people, too.

3. The troubles caused by thinking evil

- Thinking evil harms our spiritual well-being and makes us lose our inner peace. The reason for this is that a person who is calm and trusting is able to rest, while someone who thinks evil, tires himself out because he interprets even good words in a negative way. This weakens his relationship with others. It makes him demand proof upon proof of other people's truthfulness and sincerity before he can begin to trust them. This is exhausting to him as well as to others!

Whoever thinks evil also weakens his relationship with the Lord, for how can we pray for others, asking for God's blessing on them when we think evil of them? And how can we be at peace with ourselves, so that we can have the joy of speaking to God about the believers and the church when we think evil about our own brothers and sisters in the Lord, the believers and members of the church?

- Thinking evil is extremely dangerous because the thoughts of a person are his own world, the world he lives in when he is alone. So if his thoughts are

negative, his whole life will become negative. If they are positive, they make his life positive.

In the Book of Proverbs, it states: "*For as he thinks in his heart, so is he*" (Proverbs 23:7). Thoughts shape the personality. If a man thinks evil, his whole life will become evil. This throws a heavy burden on his shoulders. So let us live thinking loving and objective thoughts. This is possible because we are personally able to govern the world of our thoughts ourselves, making it clean and full of love, for our own good.

- Our thoughts are the measure of our spiritual life. They are even more important than our works in measuring our spiritual progress, because thoughts inspire and motivate the works we do. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ concentrated more on our thought world than our works, because it is our thoughts that produce works. Let us take the example of someone who gets angry at his brother without reason and nurtures his anger. His anger will eventually grow stronger and stronger until it leads him to murder. Another example is someone who looks at another man's wife with desire. He will end up committing adultery (Matthew 5:21-32). The more we progress in our spiritual life, the more we mature psychologically and progress in spiritual knowledge, and the more our thoughts about ourselves and others improve.

The apostle Paul in his pastoral letter to Titus said: "*Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men. For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men. But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and stirring about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless*" (Titus 3:1-9).

This commandment means that the one who lives the new life in Christ cannot live in the world of evil thoughts. Rather, this person renews his mind according to Christ's way of thinking.

4. Healing evil thinking

We need to make an effort to quit thinking evil, because someone who has continuously programmed his mind to think evil must change his direction of thought, which requires correcting himself and his way of thinking.

Here are three proposals to help us heal evil thinking:

- a) We should know that God is the only One who possesses proper authority without pretension. He alone possesses all information without bias. He alone knows all the details, motives and the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

On a Sunday morning in a little village, a woman was having difficulty in giving birth, so she sent for a doctor to assist her. When the doctor found out that she was too poor to be able to pay what he required, he excused himself on the pretext of not wanting to be late for church. So she sent for another doctor, who obliged her in her call for help and did not demand any payment from her. Of course, he missed church. How saddening it is to hear the reaction of the people of the church to what had happened! They said that the first doctor had put worship before money, and that the other doctor had neglected prayer for the pursuit of financial gain! This is a human judgment, passed much too quickly. It did evil to a loving soul who gave without expecting anything in return, and it praised one unworthy of praise. Therefore Christ advises us: "*Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment*" (John 7:24).

When matters become clear, we discover that our judgment of others was wrong, because we did not spend enough time in order to judge correctly. Our loving apostle Paul presents a great piece of advice to all of us; "*Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts; and then each one's praise will come from God*" (1 Corinthians 4:5).

- b) A gentle judgment of a sinner is more correct than a severe one. Everyone who is advanced in his spiritual life does this because he hates sin, and at the same time loves the sinner. The older son became angry with the younger, the lost son, who came back because he had lost all his money and so done evil to his family. The older son refused to join in the celebration of his brother's homecoming, as he thought evil of him and did not accept his homecoming as true repentance. Most probably the older son had not heard what his brother had said to his father: "*I am no longer worthy to be called your son*" (Luke 15:19).

David describes being spiritually advanced in this way: "*LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; he who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbour, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend*" (Psalm 15:1-3). The more one advances spiritually, the more one will be in reach of that blessed state and become merciful, kind, humble of mind, meek and longsuffering (Colossians 3:12).

- c) Someone who thinks evil of others judges himself and must expect to be treated the same way by others. Solomon the Wise said: "*An evil-doer gives heed to false lips; a liar listens eagerly to a spiteful tongue*" (Proverbs 17:4). He who thinks evil must also be thought evil of, because he judges people from where he himself stands. And anyone who throws stones at others must remember that he lives in a house of glass!

PRAYER

O Lord, forgive me for thinking evil of others, for I do not know everything about everybody. Help me to see the lighter side of people before I see their darker side, and grant me, when I judge others, the simplicity of doves and the wisdom of serpents. Give me grace to think of others the way you think of me, for you are always expecting good from me, and you entrust me with a lot and assign me services to do for you. You have entrusted me with my income, my time, my family and my spiritual blessings, so grant me to see others from your viewpoint. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Chapter 9

"Love Rejoices in the Truth"

(1 Corinthians 13:6)

"Love does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth" - this is heavenly reality, but it seems that some of the Corinthians rejoiced in the faults of others. Usually, when someone is in spiritual decline, he will take pleasure in finding fault with others in order to please himself and calm his conscience. When he compares his own sin with that of others, he feels that he is no worse than they, or perhaps even better, and so he ends up rejoicing in iniquity! This spiritual calmness is false, as it is built on self-delusion, which cannot calm the conscience.

We sometimes measure ourselves against ourselves, thinking that we have become better and have progressed. Perhaps we see that we are paying our tithes, attending church regularly and serving it, so we use that to reassure ourselves. Sometimes we measure ourselves against the stature of others, rejoicing in the fact that we are better than many others! But Scripture always demands that we measure ourselves against the stature of the fullness of Christ *"till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:13). Then, let us not rejoice in the iniquity of others, because we will discover that our faults are greater than theirs but instead, confess our sins and repent of them. Let us rejoice in Christ, who calms our consciences, because He is the rightful Redeemer, and the word of His Gospel is the proclamation of the true Good News.

Here are some thoughts about the truth in which love rejoices:

1. Christ is the truth

Christ said to Pilate that He had come to witness to the truth. Then Pilate asked Him a question: "What is truth?" Pilate was not prepared to hear the answer. Perhaps the tone of his voice when he asked the question implied: "Who knows where to find truth! The adherents of all religions say that they have the truth!" That may have been the reason why Jesus did not reply. He had already answered this question when He said, *"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free... Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed"* (John 8:32, 36). *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). So Christ is the truth in which love rejoices, because the greatest joy there is, is the joy of finding the pearl of great value, which causes us to leave everything else, however dear those things may be to us. Those things may be an emotional relationship or a financial project but we must leave them if they compete with our love for Christ or hinder us in carrying out His will.

Love rejoices in the truth, which is Christ. When you come to know Him as Redeemer and Saviour, and when you hear about people who have repented and accepted Him as Saviour, you rejoice. For the greatest day in the life of a person is the day when he or she comes to know Christ. The second greatest day, in order of sequence only,

because it is like the first, is the day when you lead someone else to repentance and the knowledge of Christ. May God grant you both kinds of joy!

The apostle John wrote two great letters to two great individuals. His second letter was written to the chosen lady. His third letter was written to his beloved friend Gaius. In both these letters the apostle John expresses his joy in the truth which is Christ, and he also rejoices in everyone who walks in the truth.

The preface to the second letter reads: "*The elder (John). To the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth - and not only I, but also all those who have known the truth (i.e. Christ), - because of the truth, which abides in us and will be with us forever: Grace, mercy and peace will be with you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. I rejoiced greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth, as we received commandment from the Father. And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it*" (2 John 1-6). The apostle John rejoiced in those whom he loved in truth because they walked in truth.

The preface to the third letter reads: "*The elder (John). To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all good things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth*" (3 John 1-4). John rejoiced in Gaius because he was walking in truth, and he wished him to prosper as much generally as he did spiritually, for love rejoices in the truth and all those who walk in it.

When we think of Christ's endless love to us we can say with the apostle Paul: "*For the love of Christ constrains us*" (2 Corinthians 5:14). When Christ's love constrains us and possesses us, we begin to love those who have let Christ enter into their hearts, because they love the One we love, and they are in harmony with the One with whom we are in harmony: Jesus Christ.

2. The Gospel is the truth

The Gospel is the truth which Christ proclaimed to us, and the apostle Paul described it as being "*the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation*" (Ephesians 1:13), and "*the word of the truth of the gospel*" (Colossians 1:5). In His intercessory prayer, Christ said, "*Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth*" (John 17:17). The Gospel is the true good news, because its teaching is heavenly truth, and we are saved by accepting its message, which brings joy, because it acquaints us with Christ the Saviour (Romans 1:16). It is the good news of God's grace and the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15). It is the good news of the Kingdom (Matthew 1:35). This gospel is news which brings joy, because it brings us the promise of the forgiveness of sins on account of the precious blood of Christ, and it confirms to us that this forgiveness is not based on good works of righteousness on our part, but according to His mercy through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

Christ also spoke about Abraham's rejoicing in the truth, saying: "*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad*" (John 8:56). Abraham rejoiced with faith and hope, because he saw the future salvation coming before it actually came. As for the shepherds, they praised God when the angel announced the incarnation of love to them (Luke 2:15), and they went to see "*this thing that has come to pass.*" The shepherds praised God before the angels had told them about the birth of the Messiah symbolically using the sheep they were raising in order to present them as sacrifices in the temple, and by eating the Passover meal for which a lamb had to be slaughtered in remembrance of their liberation from the slavery of Egypt. For love rejoices in the truth which is the Gospel. It also rejoices in all those who accept the Gospel, the message of truth. The shepherd rejoices in the lost sheep when he finds it, carrying it home joyfully, where he invites his friends and neighbours, telling them, "*Rejoice with me; I have found my sheep which was lost'. I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance*" (Luke 15:5-7).

The apostle Paul also expressed his joy over the believers who accepted the Gospel in Thessalonica, saying to them: "*We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe*" (1 Thessalonians 1:2-7).

The apostle brought the truth of the Gospel to the Thessalonians, and they received it with joy, despite persecution and hardship, and the apostle rejoiced in them because love rejoices in truth.

3. Justice is the truth

God is a God of justice, who loves justice and practises it. "*The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed*" (Psalm 103:6); "*All His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He*" (Deuteronomy 32:4). That is why the apostle Paul says: "*We know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who commit such things*" (Romans 2:2). Therefore, on the last day, the believers will sing, "*Great and marvellous are your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested*" (Revelations 15:3-4).

As God is just and loves the truth, He demands that His people practise justice, love peace, resist tyranny and support the oppressed. For the law of Moses says: "*You shall follow what is altogether just, that you may live and inherit the land the LORD your God is giving you*" (Deuteronomy 16:20). The Psalms demand from us: "*Defend the*

poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:3-4). Solomon the wise says: "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice" (Proverbs 21:3), meaning that justice and truth are more exalted than ritual worship. God also said through the prophet Isaiah: "Keep justice, and do righteousness" (Isaiah 56:1).

The judges of the children of Israel rejoiced with the truth, too. Samuel, the judge and prophet, presented a report to the people on his ministry as a judge, as he committed the judiciary responsibility to Saul, the first king of the children of Israel, saying: *"Witness against me before the LORD and before His anointed (i.e. King Saul). Whose ox have I taken (i.e. animal wealth) or whose donkey have I taken (i.e. means of transportation), or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed or from whose hand have I received a bribe with which to blind my eyes? I will restore it to you.' And they said, 'You have not defrauded us or oppressed us, nor have you taken anything from any man's hand'" (1 Samuel 12:3-4).*

There arose prophets who called for social justice in times of oppression and tyranny, because God's love in their hearts caused them not to rejoice in sin, but to rejoice in truth. The prophet Amos was one of the strongest of the prophets who attacked the tyranny of the rich against the poor, for he proclaimed this great motto: *"Let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream!" (Amos 5:24). He also called for the punishment of the oppressors and invited them to repent, saying: "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (Amos 5:14-15).*

Men of God, in loving the truth and attacking tyranny, feared no one. The prophet Nathan went to King David in order to rebuke him for his sin by telling a story about a rich man who had taken a poor man's only ewe. He told him: *"You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7). He did not compromise or take into consideration that he was speaking to a king. The word of the Lord from the prophet Nathan's lips touched the heart of King David, so that he repented, saying: "I have sinned against the LORD," whereupon Nathan told him: "The LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Samuel 12:13).*

Hear also what a beautiful appeal God gives us through the prophet Isaiah: *"Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. 'Come now, and let us reason together,' says the LORD, 'though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword'; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isaiah 1:16-20).*

PRAYER

Grant us to rejoice in you, Lord Christ: in your person, because you are the truth, and in your word, which is the truth. We thank you because you want to sanctify us in the

truth. Help us to rejoice with all who believe in the truth and so are set free by the truth and made to practise justice and truth. And help us also to rejoice in the truth so that we act it out, practise it and live in it, and do not oppress anyone, nor rejoice in the oppression or misfortune of anyone. May our lives always be lived according to the truth. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Chapter 10

Love is Optimistic
(1 Corinthians 13:7)

Love "bears all things,
believes all things,
hopes all things,
endures all things."

Perhaps the seventh verse of our chapter seems inapplicable because it is unreasonable! Is it possible for anyone to tolerate everything from someone else, to believe everything someone else says and to always hope for the best from someone else? And if not, is it then possible for anyone to continue to endure in spite of everything? These are big words, very optimistic and inclusive. However, they are also realistic, for I find them in Christ as well as in the mother whose love is an extension of God's love. Furthermore, I find them in the believer who walks according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh.

1. I find them in Christ

Christ bears with us even when we sin and turn away from Him. He said to His disciples in the upper room, when He knew that they would soon desert Him and flee: "*No longer do I call you servants..., but I have called you friends*" (John 15:15). He really did consider them to be friends, even though they were not. And when we come to Him praying like the tax collector: "*God be merciful to me a sinner*" (Luke 18:13), He trusts us and forgives us. If someone would ask Him, "How can You accept such a treacherous sinner?" He would answer: "This repentant tax collector who went home justified will live an upright life and will help others to find the way to justification. And even if he would sin, I would not allow him to be rejected, but I would uphold his hand" (Psalm 37:24).

2. I find them in the mother

A mother tolerates difficulties with her child which no one else could ever tolerate. In the midst of those difficulties she will shout with joy at the slightest signs of intelligence that her child shows. She will praise the child and expect her to have a glorious future. She will always defend her when anyone complains about her. She will see her as the most intelligent and beautiful person on the face of the earth! Of course, in this she is not objective, but prejudiced, because "love is blind" as the proverb goes! When she sees her make mistakes, she will believe that she will overcome her shortcomings and learn from them. She trusts that her child's future will be better than her past.

3. I find them in the spiritual believer

Abraham, the friend of God, trusted God's promise to him, waiting for twenty years for the promise to come true when his wife, Sarah, would give birth to the son of the

promise. He had to bear much and be patient. *"And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform"* (Romans 4:19-21). The Holy Spirit possessed Abraham's heart and taught him the things of God, for the love of God was poured out into his heart, and he was filled with hope (Romans 5:5). In this love, he lived the life of love which bears everything.

Timothy fulfilled the command of the apostle Paul: *"The things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also"* (2 Timothy 2:2). The teacher trusts his disciple while he is being trained. Paul trusted Timothy. He trained and bore with him, believing that God would use him to be a blessing, and Timothy in turn put his trust in those whom he trained. This is the practice of love which tolerates, believes, hopes and is patient, because it knows that the Holy Spirit uses the word and yields fruit: *"As the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return to it, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it"* (Isaiah 55:10-11). In the same way, the teacher believes in the work of God's grace, and continues to hope that his spiritual son will become better than himself.

When Elisha asked Elijah for a double portion of his spirit, Elijah told him, *"You have asked a hard thing"* (2 Kings 2:10). It would indeed be a hard thing for Elisha if God granted his request, because this would mean that he would be expected to take immense responsibilities upon himself, a double portion of the immense responsibilities faced by Elijah. Elisha's request was also hard for Elijah, because it was not Elijah who was going to grant Elisha's request. God alone could grant it. He is the only One who could bestow a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Considering this, Elijah did not rebuke his disciple Elisha for being too greedy or ambitious. On the contrary, he rejoiced in him because he loved him and told him, *"If you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you"*.

When a spiritual father discovers that his disciple has sinned, he bears with him because he is patient and longsuffering. His heart overflowing with the love which the Holy Spirit grants, is love which is patient and kind.

Optimistic love trusts the excuse of the sinner and gives him a new chance. When he is late in fulfilling his obligation, love expects things to be put in order and hopes for improvement. When this fails, love continues to be patient in everything because it forgives failure and hopes for the best. This verse teaches us that optimistic love expects sweet days and the best of situations however bad the present conditions are.

Now let us consider how optimistic love behaves:

i. Love bears all things

True love bears all things, just as Jacob bore much for the sake of his love for his cousin Rachel, serving his uncle for two periods of seven years in order to marry her. These years seemed to him like a few days because of his love for her (Genesis 29:20). Jacob described those years in this way: "*In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes*" (Genesis 31:40).

Love which bears all things does two things: a) It forgives evil; and b) It covers sins.

- a) It forgives evil and co-exists with the evil-doer. It is like the forbearance of Christ towards the sinner when He is standing at the door of his heart, knocking in order that the sinner may hear and open. The Giver of all good things never stops standing and knocking even though the one in need of the gift does not hear. The Giver, however, knows that the one in need has a problem, even if he does not know about it, so He bears with him and keeps on knocking in order to save him from whatever problem he has.

The apostle Paul learned from Christ's example, so he bore with the Corinthians, writing to them: "*But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love*" (2 Corinthians 6:4-6).

Paul had to suffer the stinging of a thorn in his flesh. Concerning this, he said: "*I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong*" (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

So love is forbearing, and Christ said: "*And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple*" (Luke 14:27). He also said, "*And you will be hated by all for My name's sake, but he who endures to the end will be saved*" (Matthew 10:22). So the love which bears all things is the love which comes from the Holy Spirit. It bears all things until the Holy Spirit brings the fruit of its forbearance to fulfilment.

- b) Love which bears all things, covers sins. Solomon said: "*Love covers all sins*" (Proverbs 10:12). This idea is also found in the word of the apostle Peter: "*Love will cover a multitude of sins*" (1 Peter 4:8).

The word of the apostle Paul: "Love bears all things" teaches us that the one who loves Christ, bears with the difficulties of life, forgives when others do wrong against him and willingly covers their sins, because he loves Christ as well as them, and because he wants to enjoy a good relationship with Christ. He is like an

artist who bears a lot for the sake of his art, standing before his canvas for hours on end, renouncing many kinds of pleasure because he loves art!

ii. Love always trusts

- a) It does this because it concentrates on Christ's power to change things and people, rather than concentrating on evil. The believers were afraid of Saul of Tarsus, alarmed at the news of his coming. When the Lord commanded Ananias to go and baptise him Ananias was afraid, because Saul had caused havoc on the saints of the Lord. However, the Lord in His mercy reassured Ananias' heart, telling him that Saul would be waiting for him, and that, after being baptised, he would suffer a lot for the sake of Christ after becoming His servant. All this actually happened. Saul changed completely. Instead of arresting Ananias, he let Ananias "arrest" him by baptising him to be a servant of Christ and a captive of the love of the cross (Acts 9:10-22). Ananias obeyed what the Lord commanded despite the difficulty he had in believing it, because he knew the immensity of Christ the Saviour's power and love for the sinful soul.

Christ gathered a weak, defenceless group of people with no power in society, no financial means and no academic degrees. Most of them were fishermen. He told them that He would make them "*fishers of men*" (Mark 1:17). It was not easy for them to believe that God would perform miracles by their hands and found the kingdom of Heaven through them. But their love for Christ trusted the One who loved them and chose them, so they came to believe that the kingdom of heaven "*is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds, but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches*" (Matthew 13:31-32).

The apostle Paul speaks about the power of God working in Christ, saying: "What is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which he worked in Christ when he (a) raised Him from the dead and (b) seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, and (c) put all things under His feet" (Ephesians 1:19-22). This same power by which He raised Christ (a) raises us from the death of our sins, (b) seats us at His right hand in the heavenly realms, and (c) gives us grace to submit totally to Him through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

- b) Love which believes all things does not concentrate on the difficulties of life, but on the Lord who cares: "*Man is born to trouble... of few days and full of trouble*" (Job 5:7; 14:1). Certainly, our life is full of difficulties. If we concentrated on these we would perish. But if we concentrate on our God's care, He will show us mercy and raise us up. Abraham asked his Lord: "*Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?*" (Genesis 18:25). Yes, He will, and love trusts that all things work together for the good of those who love God, those who are called according to His purpose, whatever their circumstances. For God is always at work, changing the results of evil into good.

We all remember how the apostle Peter walked on the water, but as soon as he turned his face away from Christ to the tumultuous waves, he began to sink (Matthew 14:22-33). This contains a profound lesson for all of us.

iii. Love always hopes

- a) This is because love is built on a force external to itself, namely the force of God: Abraham, the father of all believers, is an example of this. God promised him: "*I have made you a father of many nations,*" although Abraham had not yet produced any offspring. Abraham, however, was sure that God is the God who raises the dead and calls the things that do not exist as if they already existed. So against all human hope, Abraham believed in the hope of the divine promise that he would become the father of many nations, as he had been told: "*So shall your offspring be*". Abraham was strengthened in his faith by trusting God's promises and he gave God the glory, being fully convinced that God would be able to do what he promised, because he had experienced the love and trustworthiness of God (Romans 4:17-21). The word of God did not record this as something which only happened to Abraham, but as something which happens to all who have the faith of Abraham and hope for the fulfilment of all God's promises, and to whom God will credit this faith as righteousness.

Love which hopes all things, knows God's power, mercy and grace. The prodigal son left his father's house in rebellion against the lifestyle of his father. But the loving father knew that his son would not find a better place than his father's house, so every day he stood waiting at the road for his lost son to return. And when this lost son decided to come back, even when he was still far off, his father saw him and took pity on him. The father ran towards him, flung his arms around him and kissed him (Luke 15:11-24). Hopeful love received what it was hoping for, and God made it come true that the father would live to see his son return.

St. Monica prayed for her son Augustine for 24 years. The more she prayed for him, however, the more he went astray. The crying, praying mother then met St. Ambrose in Milan and complained to him about the lack of an answer to these prayers. He asked her, "Do you pray for him with tears?" She answered affirmatively. So he gave her the famous answer: "Such a son of tears cannot possibly perish." Augustine did not perish, but returned to the Lord as a blessed saint. In his "Confessions" St. Augustine says, "O Lord, you were calling me, but I said to you: 'Not now', so you called me again, and I again said: 'Not now'. You then continued to call, until at last I told you: 'Here I am!'"

God's love, a mother's love and all love whose source is Christ, hopes all things. Is your spouse far from the Lord? Love hopes all things. Is your brother far from the Lord? Love hopes all things. With Christ, there is no despair!

- b) Love is optimistic and hopes all things because it knows that what it has experienced itself will be experienced by others, for there is no variation or shadow of turning in God (James 1:17), and "*Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever*" (Hebrews 13:8). When the Lord gets hold of a soul which is far from Him and brings it back to the fold of faith, this soul grasps that the lost one will

return however long he has gone astray. God's love never changes, neither does the need of the soul, nor the work of the Holy Spirit. In perfect hope this soul says with the apostle Paul: "*I press on that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me*" (Philippians 3:12). Christ did lay hold of Saul of Tarsus when he was running away from Him and brought him to repentance. So if such a harsh and stubborn opponent could become a follower of Christ, then any other harsh and stubborn opponent can become one, because love hopes all things!

iv. Love endures all things

What does love do when it endures, believes, hopes and waits without seeing its hopes fulfilled? The answer is that it endures, not with the endurance of despair and inability, but with the endurance of hope which says with the psalmist: "*Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning*" (Psalm 30:5). For the night must end and the sun must rise!

When the city of Samaria was besieged and the people were starving, the king was wearing sackcloth and saying: "*If the LORD does not help you, where can I find help for you? From the threshing floor or from the wine press?*" For there was neither grain, nor oil, nor grapes. But the prophet Elisha, who saw God's law and power, was hopeful and said: "*Tomorrow about this time a seah of flour shall be sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria*" (2 Kings 6,7) - and it happened!

Love is patient because it knows that the intervention of divine grace always comes at the right time and it understands that God will be quick to save.

God's love was patient with us until we repented. It bore with our disobedience until we obeyed. Are we patient with those who do evil against us? The love of God trusted us and gave us a new chance. Is it possible for us to give a person who has done evil against us a new chance to repent and return to God? God's love has put a great hope in us. Is it possible that we can have hope for someone else? Love bears, trusts, hopes all things and is patient in everything.

PRAYER

Our heavenly Father, we thank you that you have borne with us and trusted us when we repented before you, and you expected us to be good believers. When we misbehaved, you had patience with us. Help us to bear with others and trust those who do evil against us when they apologise to us. Grant us to hope the best from them and to have patience with their weaknesses as you have had patience with us, that we may be compassionate and forbearing as you have been forbearing with us, too.

Make this a profound lesson to us as we are in your presence every instant. Help us to show love to you and those who surround us. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Chapter 11

The Perpetuity of Love

"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:8-12)

"*Love never fails*". The expression "never fails" in Greek suggests the image of a group of soldiers travelling a long distance in the heat of summer in order to reach a far place. When the soldiers begin their journey, one after the other starts to collapse because of the strong heat and the bad condition of the road. Only one of them overcomes all the obstacles that made the others fail, so that he reaches the goal - he "never fails."

This is the image of love which never fails, for when all other virtues stop, the virtue of love remains. We see it in our Redeemer and Saviour, who completed the way to the cross. He was not dazzled by the loyalty of His disciples, for they were a group of weaklings who denied Him when He was in the pinch, even though a friend is supposed to love at all times, especially in times of need (Proverbs 17:17). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ said to them: "*Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?*" (Matthew 26:40). It was not because He gloried in the multitudes whom He had fed and who received healing through Him, either, for He certainly knew that they would scream, "*Crucify him! Crucify him! Let his blood be on us and on our children!*" (Matthew 27:25).

There was no human motive which made Christ's love continue unabated, even on the cross. What motivated Him was that He loved His own in the world until the end (John 13:1). His love never fails. When all virtues fail to work, love remains and succeeds.

In 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 the apostle Paul presents two main ideas about love which never fails, saying: There are great things which do not endure. Then he goes on to explain to us how love endures.

I. THREE THINGS WHICH DO NOT ENDURE

1. Prophecies will cease

Prophesying means foretelling the future or warning and proclaiming God's message to people, for "*Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort*" (1 Corinthians 14:3).

- Prophecies will cease when they are fulfilled. Thus, the prophecy about Christ being born of a virgin was a prophecy to Isaiah and the people of his time (Isaiah 7:14). Now that it has been fulfilled, it is no longer a prophecy but it has become history to us. The prophecy of Micah about Christ's birth in Bethlehem was a prophecy about the future for the prophet Micah and the people of his time (Micah 5:2). But now that it has been fulfilled, it has become a blessed past and a glorious heritage to us.

There are prophecies about Christ's second coming and they are still prophecies, but they will also cease to be so when they are fulfilled.

- Prophecy in the sense of warning and exhortation will cease because the time will come when the believer finds himself in the presence of our heavenly Father, as Christ said: "*...that you may be where I am*" (John 14:3). Then he will not need any warning or exhortation. For in heaven there is no sin, no temptation and no fight against evil. So the believers will not need to remind each other about God's word in order to be victorious over temptations, because temptations do not exist in heaven, "*No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest*" (Hebrews 8:11).

2. Tongues will cease

The Holy Spirit gave the gift of speaking in tongues on the day of Pentecost. He gave it to the disciples in order to proclaim the Gospel to those who came from abroad to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem. These people could not understand the language of the Galilean preachers, so God enabled the prophets and the apostles to speak in the languages of all those who were present in order that they might understand (Acts 2:1-8). However, since the Gospel has spread to all the world and the Bible has been translated into more than one thousand languages, we no longer need the gift of tongues the way the apostles did at Pentecost. And when we appear in the presence of God, there will be one language only, the language of love. We should not forget that tongues first appeared when God confused the languages of those who were building the tower of Babel (Genesis 11). Tongues imply multiplicity and diversity of people. In heaven, however, there will be unity of mind and heart - the very language of heaven.

3. Knowledge will vanish away

- The kind of knowledge intended here is not natural and mathematical, but the gift of divine knowledge and the proclamation of heavenly things to people. Knowledge will vanish in heaven because the believers will no longer need it, for they will be standing in the presence of the Word Himself, Christ the Living Word. Therefore, they will no longer need the written word of the Bible, because He is the complete knowledge, "*and they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light*" (Revelations 22:4-5).

- Even natural knowledge will vanish away, because the things we consider fixed and stable today will not be so tomorrow, because man's knowledge develops. People used to say that the atom could not be split, but then discovered that it could. The knowledge we thought was correct in our childhood years comes to naught when we grow up, because our knowledge develops and grows. *"For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away"* (verses 9-10). For the one who is a child today grows and leaves what is past, as the apostle Paul says: *"When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things"* (verse 11).

The apostle Paul further says: *"Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known"* (verse 12). Mirrors at that time were of polished metal or stone, in which an individual could not see his or her own face clearly. This was, of course, before the invention of glass mirrors, which give a clear image. So, the apostle is saying that now we see as in a metal mirror, and look at unclear features, as if at a mystery. In the future, however, when we stand in the Lord's presence face to face with Him *"I shall know as I also am known"*.

That which is a mystery today will become clearly revealed tomorrow, because there are things which reason cannot grasp today, but which we will know better, in times yet to come.

- There are also things which some understand and others do not. For instance, the first Christians understood the law of Moses in a way which the Jews did not understand. The apostle Paul said: *"Moses... put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were hardened. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 3:13-18).
- Today's believer in Christ also understands less about Christ than he will understand tomorrow, because he grows in grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Peter 3:18). The apostle John says: *"Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is"* (1 John 3:2). Thus, we are limited but there is a reality which is unlimited and everlasting, and that is love which never fails.

II. IN WHICH WAY IS LOVE, PERPETUAL?

1. Love never fails as a living principle

- a) God is love: "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*" (1 John 4:7-11).

Love stands firm and never fails because it is God's reality, the One who is everlasting in existing, giving and loving. It is love which makes God say: "'Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' says the Lord GOD, 'and not that he should turn from his ways and live?'" (Ezekiel 18:23). He is the One "*who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:4). Everyone who repents and remains in God's love will not fail in his love for God, because His seed remains in him, and he says with the apostle Paul: "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8:35-39).

- b) Love is the summary of all the commandments. With the advances of the Jewish religious leaders in religious sciences they found a formula for summing up the Law in few words. One of them came to ask Christ about His formula, and He answered him: "*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: '*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:34-40).

The apostle Paul said: "*The commandments... and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'* Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law" (Romans 13:9-10).

- c) The mark of the Christian is love. Christ told His disciples: "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:34-35). The apostle John said: "*If someone says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also*" (1 John 4:20-21).

2. Love never fails as a motivation for serving

What is it that motivates a mother to serve day and night, year after year? Even when her children grow up and leave their home she keeps serving them and her grandchildren with all her love and self-sacrifice. A mother never takes a vacation, is never pensioned off and never thinks of the "end of service". The reason for this constantly renewed pouring out of herself in self-sacrifice is the love of a mother, which never fails!

If someone serves in order to earn money, it means that his service finishes when he finishes receiving his wages. If someone serves for the sake of his own personal interests, he stops serving when his interests have been served. But if someone serves out of love, he never stops serving, because he does not serve to be seen like someone who just wants to please people. And everything he does, he does from his heart as for the Lord, not for people, knowing that he will get his recompense from the Lord, because he serves the Lord Christ (Colossians 3:22-24).

Christ really taught us something great when He said: *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two"* (Matthew 5:38-41).

There was a law which gave any Roman soldier the right to order any citizen in the colonised states to carry his weapons and equipment for him for one mile. On a certain day a Jew was walking on the road when a Roman soldier stopped him to commission him with carrying his equipment for a mile, which the man did. When he had finished that one mile, the Roman soldier said: "Enough." Then the Jew said: "I will carry your gear for another mile." The soldier said: "But the law does not require that from you." The Jew told him: "That's right, but I am not busy today, and I don't have many responsibilities!" The soldier was astonished. He let the man do as he offered, but the soldier's view of the Jew changed. For at first the Jew had been walking behind the soldier, but now they began to walk side by side. The soldier asked the Jew about his reason for volunteering to serve twice, to which the Jew answered: "There is a teacher from Nazareth who taught us to walk two miles with anyone who forces us to walk one mile with him." So the soldier asked more questions in order to learn more about this teacher. And by the time they had walked the second mile the soldier had decided to become a follower of this teacher from Nazareth!!

Love distinguishes itself by its endurance. It continues forward without stopping and wins the day, even though people see it as weakness or deceit. Some day, the opponent will discover that love is strong and victorious.

3. Love never fails as a source of happiness

A psychoanalyst once opened his heart to Christ and began studying the Bible in depth. He decided to practice loving everybody, including his enemies. Very quickly he discovered that love is the greatest source of happiness, both to those who do evil

and those against whom evil is done. This happened through the following experience, which repeated itself several times:

This psychoanalyst had a superior who was annoying him, not because of any fault of the psychoanalyst's, so he decided to do three things:

- a) To pray for this person three times a day. The words of the prayer should be positive. If his superior had heard this prayer, his heart would have been filled with happiness.
- b) To think positively of the superior, so that every time a bad thought about him crossed his mind he would exchange it for a good one. This required the psychoanalyst to think for a long time in order to find something positive in his superior, something that would help him change his attitude towards his superior.
- c) Every time he came to think of his superior, he would pray a short, quick prayer for him: O Lord, bless him; or: O Lord, do good to him.

The psychoanalyst decided to do this spiritual exercise for a whole month. In the course of that month he noticed how his superior changed, not only with regard to the way the superior dealt with him, but with regard to how he dealt with everybody. Thus the superior became happy and the psychoanalyst became even happier. The psychoanalyst discovered: "The prayer of love most certainly changes the one who prays it, for he loves as Christ loves. It may also change the one for whom it is prayed, as well as it may change the circumstances through which the difficulties arose." *"Love never fails"*.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, give us wisdom to see your love for us, which never fails. You loved us so much while we were still in our sins that you turned us away from them. You still show patience to us by turning us towards you and cleansing us. Grant us the ability to love everyone, including those who do evil against us, with a love that never fails, but continues on its way, trusting in victory. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Chapter 12

"But the Greatest of These is Love"

"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love"
(1 Corinthians 13:13).

We have come to the last chapter, which is the climax to this book. We will see the three virtues that abide in the life of the believer, faith, hope and love. Love, however, is the greatest of these abiding things!

We have considered the importance of love (verses 1-3), its characteristics (verses 4-7), its perpetuity ("love never fails", verses 8-12). Here, we will consider love in its greatness.

Prophecies, knowledge and tongues will vanish away, whereas faith, hope and love will abide. Then, in turn, faith and hope will vanish away, whereas love will remain forever and ever, because "God is love."

1. The three things that abide - Faith, Hope and Love

a) Faith that abides for the whole of the believer's life means:

- Believing, in the sense of trusting in God's word. The Holy Spirit convinces us so that we believe in the truth of the Gospel. When we hear the word of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit declares to us that this is the good news that has come from God, just as it happened to the shepherds who heard the angel telling the good news of Christ's birth. They received the message in faith, so believing it, they went to see "*this thing that [had] come to pass*" (Luke 2:15). This is because the Holy Spirit granted them faith.
- Faith, in the sense of believing, also gives us confidence. As a result of our believing and trusting, we have confidence in God. Peter said to Christ: "*Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net*" (Luke 5:5). King David had full confidence in his God, saying: "*Preserve me, O God, for in You I put my trust. O my soul, you have said to the LORD, 'you are my Lord, my goodness is nothing apart from You'*" (Psalm 16:1-2).
- Faith means security, too, as the Hebrew words for faith and security come from the same root. The believer is an individual who is secure, at peace and without fear. "*Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; 'for YAH, the LORD, is my strength and my song; He also has become my salvation'*" (Isaiah 12:2). The Lord is our true security, "*I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; for You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety*" (Psalm 4:8). He is the One who can make us sleep without fear, because He keeps us and neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4). "*If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established*" (Isaiah 7:9).

- Furthermore, faith means faithfulness. The believer is faithful to the Lord. He encourages him by saying: "*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (Revelation 2:10). When he obeys, God will say the greatest word of encouragement: "*Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord*" (Matthew 25:23). The faithful Lord is worthy of our putting our trust in Him. And faith abides because it makes God's gifts of salvation our share. For "*he who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him*" (John 3:36). So let us beware lest there be in any of us an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Hebrews 3:11-12), because without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

b) Hope is waiting and hoping, relying on the Lord's word

No word of His good promise shall fail (1 Kings 8:56). So hope reassures us that the promises will be fulfilled, and makes us sing the song of victory in confidence: "*In the ways of Your judgments, O LORD, we have waited for You; the desire of our soul is for Your name, and for the remembrance of You. With my soul I have desired You in the night, yes, by my spirit within me I will seek You early; for when Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness*" (Isaiah 26:8-9).

Hope also makes us wait for the coming glory, as the apostle Peter said: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*" (1 Peter 1:3-5). "*And everyone who has this hope in Him (i.e. Christ as the One who will come again) purifies himself, just as He is pure*" (1 John 3:3). For the hope of Christ's second coming will help us to live a holy life while we wait for His second coming.

c) Love is the will to do good works for God, our neighbours and our enemies

True love is the love which wants to give, not only to those whom we love, but also to our enemies. Christ taught us this in the Sermon on the Mount, "*that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust*" (Matthew 5:45). Christian love (like Christ's love) is the love of the will which expresses itself in works and giving, not in words, but in practice and truth in obedience to the apostolic command: "*Therefore if your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*" (Romans 12:20-21).

A certain lady schoolteacher from a pagan background wanted to know who of her students were Christians. She asked everyone of her students: Do you love your enemy? The answer of the students distinguished the sheep from the goats.

2. The relationship between these three things that abide

We may use the image of a tree for these three virtues that abide. Its roots and trunk are faith, which is the foundation of our sound relationship with God. Its branches are hope which welcomes God's purposes for oneself. Its fruit is love which is service and doing good wilfully for God and others.

Faith comes from the word of God which announces the good news to us. "*So then faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of God*" (Romans 10:17). Hope also comes from our relying on God's word, as the apostle Paul said as he was standing trial: "*And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers*" (Acts 26:6). For we build our hope on faith. Love, then, comes from faith and hope, for love is active because it trusts in the firm hope, based on the word of God, that it will never fail. Therefore, faith trusts in the word, hope trusts in the promises of the word, and love practises the word.

Faith awaits the Lord, hope awaits the signs of the Lord's approval, and love awaits serving God as it is serving people.

Faith without love is faith without works. It is dead because it is of the intellect only, like the faith of the demons who believe and shudder, yet do not change. Faith without hope loses the vision for the future, because it sees nothing but the past. The content life has a goal and is a life through which faith and hope walk together, as is clear from the word of Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes, who said: "*Behold, I am dying, but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers*" (Genesis 48:21).

Hope without faith is illusion based on wishful thinking. A believer does not practice this, because he bases his hope on his faith in God's word as it is recorded in Scripture. Hope without love is selfish, because man only thinks about himself, and wishes and hopes only for himself!

Without faith, it is impossible to please God. Without hope, life turns to desperation and misery and we become the most wretched of all people. Without love, life becomes self-centred, and loses the image of God. If these virtues are found together, however, our faith will be there to serve others, and our hope will be for our own good as well as for the good of others.

3. The greatest of these is love

However, if the two virtues of faith and hope abide and are bound together by love, why does the apostle say that love is the greatest?

- a) It is God's attribute, and He has practiced it from eternity. The Gospel says that God is love (1 John 4:8,16), but it does not say that God is faith or hope. True, He does give love, faith and hope, and He trusts in the believers in order to realise His purposes for the world, hoping that they will serve others, but He says, "*he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him*" (1 John 4:16).

- b) Love is greater than faith and hope because it produces greater results. It makes us "*sons of our Father in heaven*" (Matthew 5:45). The apostle says: "*Be followers of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma*" (Ephesians 5:1-2).
- c) It blesses others. Faith and hope are blessings to the believer himself, as faith is beneficial to the one who has it, because it saves him from his sins. "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved*" (Acts 16:31). Hope makes the one who has it hopeful. But love benefits both the one who has it, his family and the whole kingdom of God, for the one who loves God with all his heart will be blessed and will love his family, his whole household and his church and also those who disagree with him.
- d) Love is a perpetual attribute.

Faith is like Moses when he was standing on the top of Mount Pisgah looking at the land of Canaan before him without being able to enter it (Deuteronomy 34:1), even though he believed firmly that the people would take the land.

Hope is like the morning star shining brightly at the horizon, announcing the break of day, but fading away in the brightness of the rays of the rising sun.

Love, however, is like Elijah when he ascended to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). It does not see death, for it ascends with us to heaven and remains with us because God is love.

Faith abides, hope abides and love abides. But the greatest of these is love.

May the Lord fill our hearts with that great love which never fails!

PRAYER

Our heavenly Father, grant us the faith that puts all its trust in you, so that we may attain the promises. Make hope abide deeply in us, so that we may live a life of hope which is not dashed.

Give us love like your love, so that we may give without expecting anything in return, that we might be taken up high in your love's chariots of fire which surround us. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Quiz

Dear Reader, if you have read this book you will be able to answer the following questions. Everyone who answers at least 22 of the questions correctly will be sent another book.

1. Mention in one sentence why: a) love is more important than eloquence; and b) love is more important than miracles.
2. What does it mean that "love suffers long" and that "love is kind"?
3. Mention two of longsuffering love's works.
4. How would you answer a person who says, "If I were longsuffering towards someone who does evil against me, he would harass me even more"?
5. In which way does hatred always harm the one who hates? And when does hatred harm the hated?
6. Mention two things which help us deal with hatred.
7. Mention two reasons for not boasting.
8. Why is a spiritually gifted person more prone to becoming boastful than others?
9. Mention two examples of the ugliness of sin.
10. Explain this saying of Martin Luther: "My Lord Christ, you became what you never were in order to make me what I never was".
11. How do we keep our tongues from coarse talking?
12. How did Samson's mother encourage her husband Manoah?
13. Mention a beautiful thing that happened at the place where Solomon's temple was eventually built.
14. Why does love seek that of others? Give an example of this from the New Testament.
15. In what situations is anger a holy duty?
16. When is anger sinful?
17. How do you gain victory over sinful anger?
18. What does it mean to think evil?

19. Why do we think evil?
20. What is the truth in which love rejoices?
21. What is the relationship between truth and social justice? How did the prophet Samuel demonstrate that he rejoiced in the truth?
22. We find optimistic love in heaven and in two places on earth. Mention these.
23. Give an example of someone you know who has applied the principle "*love covers all sins*" (Proverbs 10:12).
24. Give an example from your own life of the fulfilment of the word: "*Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning*" (Psalm 30:5).
25. What does it mean that "*love never fails*"?
26. When will prophecies cease?
27. Give a contemporary example of proof that love motivates for service.
28. The disciple of Christ walked an extra mile with the Roman soldier. What was the result?
29. A psychoanalyst did three things with the person who was harassing him. What are they?
30. Faith, hope and love resemble a tree - in which way?

Please send your answers to the address below. Include your full name and address on the answer sheet as well as on the envelope.