

1 Corinthians 13:4–7

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Love Has Long Patience — Applied Rightly

The love that has long patience must be understood in its proper sphere, and not misapplied. In 1 Corinthians 5, a person is identified as leaven, and the apostle commands that he be put out of the assembly. It would not do for someone to say, Let us look first at chapter 13 — in the same letter — where it says love has long patience, and therefore we should be more patient with this person. That is not the subject here. Love's long patience applies to the irritations and provocations of personal trial and personal life. It does not mean withholding from the Lord what is due to Him, or failing to act on His word when obedience is clearly required. Patience at our own expense, yes — but not patience at the Lord's expense.

The Lord Jesus displayed long patience throughout His life in this world. He came from heaven, where there were none of the irritations and stresses of this scene, into a world filled with them — and far worse. Yet none of that deterred Him. He says, *Have I been so long time with you?* — there was a long time He bore with His disciples. But there also came a time when He had to say, *Get thee behind me, Satan*. There is a time and a season for these things. There is a proper

balance and Christian understanding of them.

Patience is not easy — it takes practice, and it takes faith. Faith to believe that God will make all things right in His time and in His way. We are not to concern ourselves with whether someone else appears to get away with something. No one gets away with anything. As the Scripture says, some men's sins go before them, and others follow after.

Charity — The Love That Is According to God's Nature

The word *charity* is an older English rendering of the Greek word for love according to the nature of God — the same word used in John 3:16, and the same truth expressed in 1 John 4: *God is love*. It is the real thing. The other Greek word for love operates more on a human and affectionate level; this one is divine in its character and source.

Envieth Not — Vaunteth Not Itself — Is Not Puffed Up

Love is not emulous. It does not strive to be ahead of others, to be more wealthy, to have a better position, to surpass in the things of this world. All such emulation has self as its object. The Lord did not engage in it — *I do always those things that please the Father*. That is enough. Nothing more and nothing less than that pleases God, and He was perfect in it. Emulation tends toward self-pleasing, and self-pleasing moves directly into what follows: love vaunteth not itself, is not insolent or rash, not self-assertive.

And then: is not puffed up. What is puffed up? It is filled with self — full of self. The Lord was the effulgence of the glory of God, and yet He hid that glory under the form of a servant. All through the Gospels one sees this moral glory: the fullness of what God is in love, hid under that servant form. The dropsy that the Lord healed in the synagogue — puffiness in the physical body — has its

spiritual counterpart. If it gets in among those who profess to be the Lord's people, He can arrange things to bring His people down to size. It is far better to learn from the Scripture now than to have to learn by His disciplinary hand.

Doth Not Behave Itself Unseemly

Something seemly is in keeping with the thought and character of God — suitable before Him. Unseemly behaviour is everything that is not that. The scope of this phrase is very broad. One cannot say, I was just a little off to one side of what is seemly — there is no crack left for such exceptions. The verse covers all seemly behaviour as its positive standard, and unseemly behaviour as everything else. Seemly behaviour honours the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and brings Him glory. Unseemly behaviour does the opposite.

There is a word for a related thing in English — ostentation. The person who sets themselves off, who moves and speaks and presents themselves so as to be noticed and set apart: that is a form of it. It can take many forms, some quite obvious and others subtle. But love does not produce it. The Scripture leaves no loopholes here, as it leaves none elsewhere. Whatsoever is not of faith is sin — another verse of the same breadth. God's word pins us down. It does not leave murky, indistinct grey areas for those who prefer to be unpinnable.

Seeketh Not Her Own

This connects directly with the state of the Corinthian assembly throughout this letter. In chapter 6, the saints were going to law with one another — taking a brother to court — and the apostle rebuked them: you should rather suffer wrong. That was the spirit of seeking one's own. And in chapter 14, the tongue-speakers were using their gift in the assembly when no one was there to interpret — rendering it unintelligible and therefore unprofitable to anyone. What were they speaking for? To hear themselves. It was the same spirit: seeking one's own,

filled with self-importance.

The spirit that takes a brother to the law court and the spirit that speaks in a tongue with no interpreter are expressions of the same thing. If a wrong spirit is in a person, it will come out in whatever they put their hands to — whether in their relationships or in their use of gift. The characteristics of love and its absence show themselves in the whole of life, not in just one area.

Is Not Easily Provoked — Thinketh No Evil

The sensitivity that takes offence at every little thing — that is set off at the drop of a word — is not what God is looking for in a Christian. The Lord was perfectly sensitive to what was due to God on every occasion. But as to personal sensitivity that bristles at every small provocation, this is just what this verse addresses. The Proverbs say it plainly: *the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood, so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife*. Love disconnects those things.

And there appears to be a progression: is not easily provoked leads directly into thinketh no evil. What happens when one allows oneself to be provoked? One begins to think about the person who did this thing — and what kind of thoughts arise? Imaginations. Imputing of evil where there may be no evidence of it. Thinketh no evil means not to accuse in the mind, not to impute evil to another person without evidence. And beyond that, not to store up a reckoning of wrongs received, waiting for the chance to repay.

The Lord Jesus gave the clearest possible illustration of this when He said from the cross: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*. He who truly knew what was in their hearts gave expression to words that are the very essence of thinking no evil. That is recorded in Luke 23 — the Gospel in which the Lord's humanity is the chief feature. As a man, in the fullness of His love, He thought no evil of those who were crucifying Him.

Rejoiceth Not in Iniquity — Rejoiceth in the Truth

There is a sharp contrast set here. The rejoicing in iniquity — looking at what another has done, being secretly pleased at it, perhaps as evidence of one's own superiority — is a horrible thing. As Romans 1 puts it, those who are thoroughly corrupt do not only practise such things themselves, but have pleasure in them that do them. It is a kind of vicarious enjoyment of sin. And it is closer to our own hearts than we might like to admit — even in something so apparently harmless as a story told for a laugh that has some sin at its centre. There is, deep down, a small voice that takes a little pleasure in the sin that is there.

Against that, love rejoiceth in the truth. The truth is the foundation of all holiness and walk here for God's pleasure. *Sanctify them by thy truth: thy word is truth.* There is positional sanctification — being set apart to God in Christ, untouchable. And there is practical sanctification — the progressive casting off of things that are not for God's pleasure, as one grows in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. That is not possible without the truth of God, because it is there that we are instructed and informed.

2 Thessalonians 2 is solemn: those who are given over to the Antichrist are described as having received not the love of the truth — not merely the truth, but the love of it. Love rejoices in the truth. That is an ongoing thing throughout all of Christian life, not just at conversion. And 2 John 3 gives the right order: *in truth and love* — not love and truth. God is light before God is love, in the order of His own self-revelation in Scripture. Light comes first, love flows out. The cross is the proof of it: because God is light, all that was due Him in holiness was satisfied by Christ at Calvary — and then His love can go freely out to lost sinners.

Beareth All Things — Believeth All Things — Hopeth All Things — Endureth All Things

Verse 7 is filled with all things, four times over. These are all Christ-centred, and the sphere to which they apply is the sphere of the gospel, of Christian ministry, of the Lord's interests in the world. The apostle gives the key in 1 Corinthians 9:12: *We have not used this power, but bear all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ.* Bearing all things is the foregoing of personal advantage for the sake of the Lord's work. The bearing is of those things which, if pressed, might in some way hinder the furtherance of the gospel. Love can bear their foregoing without resentment.

Believeth all things: in this sphere, receiving all that God has said, all the truth of His word, whether welcome or not. Not the rationalisations by which a corrective scripture is explained away so that it has no bearing on oneself. That is not believing what God has said. This is not about credulity toward everything men say — it is about the full reception of what God has said, without exception.

Hopeth all things: hope in Scripture is a deferred certainty. God has said so, therefore it is certain — it has simply not arrived yet. But it is counted upon as something as good as done. Love relies upon God's promises with that kind of hope.

Endureth all things: how does this differ from beareth all things? It is possible to bear something without being patient about it — bearing it under protest, as it were. Endureth all things means bearing with patience. James speaks of having patience unto the coming of the Lord. Love operative in the soul produces that patience — it does not say, let us go and change the social order; it says, have patience, for the coming of the Lord draws near.