

To

From

Date

The
Greatest
Thing
in the
World

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Henry Drummond



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Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity [love], I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And 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, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

[Love] 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] never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, [love], these three; but the greatest of these is [love].

THE GREATEST THING IN THE WORLD



Since ancient times, people have asked themselves this question: What is the greatest thing in the world? You have life before you. You can only live it once. What is the noblest object of desire, the supreme gift to covet?

We are used to being told that the greatest thing in the religious world is *faith*. For centuries that great word has been Christianity's keynote, and we have easily learned to look on it as the greatest thing in the world.

Well, we are wrong. If we have been told that, we may miss the mark. I have taken you, in the chapter that I have just read, to Christianity at its source; and there we have seen, "The greatest of these is love." It is not an oversight.

Paul was speaking of faith just a moment before. He says, "If I have all faith, so that I can remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing." So far from forgetting, he deliberately contrasts them, "Now abideth faith, hope, love," and without a moment's hesitation, the decision falls, "The greatest of these is love."

And it is not prejudice. People are apt to recommend to others their own strong points. The observing student can detect a beautiful tenderness growing and ripening all through his character as Paul gets old; but the hand that wrote, "The greatest of these is love," when we meet it first, is stained with blood.

Nor is this letter to the Corinthians peculiar in singling out love as the greatest good. The masterpieces of Christianity are agreed about it. Peter says, "Above all things have fervent love among yourselves." *Above all things*. And John goes further: "God is love." Remember the profound remark that Paul makes elsewhere: "Love is the fulfilling of the law." Did you ever think what he meant by that?

In those days people were working their passage to heaven by keeping the Ten Commandments,

and the hundred and ten things, without ever thinking about them. If you love, you will unconsciously fulfill the whole law. And you can readily see for yourselves how that must be so. Take any of the commandments. "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." If a person loves God, you will not need to tell him that. Love is the fulfilling of that law. "Take not His name in vain." Would someone who loves God ever dream of taking His name in vain? "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Those who truly love God are only too glad to have one day in seven to dedicate more exclusively to Him. Love would fulfill all these laws regarding God. Similarly, if someone loved his neighbor, you would never think of telling him to honor his father and mother. He could not do anything else. It would be preposterous to tell him not to kill. You could only insult him if you suggested that he should not steal—how could he steal from those he loved? It would be superfluous to beg him not to bear false witness against his neighbor. If he loved him it would be the last thing he would do. And you would never dream of urging him not to covet what his neighbors had. He would rather they possessed it than himself. In this

way, “love is the fulfilling of the law.” It is the rule for fulfilling all rules, the new commandment for keeping all the old commandments, Christ’s one secret of the Christian life.

Paul had learned this truth; in this noble eulogy he has given us the most wonderful and original account of this greatest gift. We can divide it into three parts: In the beginning of the short chapter, we have love contrasted; in the heart of it, we have love analyzed; toward the end we have love defended as the supreme gift.

The Contrast

Paul begins by contrasting love with other things that men in those days esteemed. I won’t attempt to go over those things in detail. Their inferiority is already obvious.

Then he contrasts love with eloquence. And what a noble gift it is, the power of playing upon the souls and wills of men and women and rousing them to lofty purposes and holy deeds. Yet Paul says, “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am becoming as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” And we all know why. We have all felt the brazenness of words

without emotion, the hollowness, the unaccountable unpersuasiveness, of eloquence behind which lies no love.

He contrasts it with prophecy. He contrasts it with mysteries. He contrasts it with faith. He contrasts it with charity. Why is love greater than faith? Because the end is greater than the means. What is the use of having faith? It is to connect the soul with God. And what is the object of connecting one's soul with God? To become like God. But God is love. Hence faith, the means, exists in order to love, the end. Love, therefore, obviously is greater than faith. It is greater than charity, again, because the whole is greater than a part. Charity is only a little bit of love, one of the innumerable avenues of love, and there may even be, and there is, a great deal of charity without love. It is an easy thing to toss a coin to a beggar in the street; it is generally an easier thing to do it than not. Yet love is just as often in the withholding. We purchase relief from the sympathetic feelings aroused by the spectacle of misery, at the cost of a penny. It is too cheap—too cheap for us, and often too dear for the beggar. If we really loved him we would do either more for him, or less.

Then Paul contrasts it with sacrifice and martyrdom. And I beg the little band of would-be missionaries—and I have the honor to call some of you by this name for the first time—to remember that though you give your bodies to be burned, and have not love, it profits nothing—nothing! You can take nothing greater to the unchurched world than the mark and reflection of the love of God on your own character. That is the universal language. It will take you years to speak Chinese, or the dialects of India. From the day you land, however, that language of love, understood by all, will be pouring forth its unconscious eloquence. It is the man or woman who is the missionary; it is not his or her words. Character is the message. In the heart of Africa, among the great lakes, I have come across men and women who remembered the only white man they ever saw before—David Livingstone; and as you cross his footsteps in that continent, men's faces will light up as they speak of the kind doctor who passed there years ago. They could not understand him, but they felt the love that beat in his heart. Take into your new sphere of labor, where you also mean to lay down your life, that simple charm, and your lifework must succeed. You can

take nothing greater; you need take nothing less. It is not worthwhile going if you take anything less. You may take every accomplishment; you may be braced for every sacrifice; but if you give your body to be burned, and have not love, it will profit you and the cause of Christ nothing.

The Analysis

After contrasting love with these other, less important, things, Paul gives us in three short verses an amazing analysis of this supreme thing. It is a compound thing, he tells us. It is like light. As you have seen a scientist take a beam of light and pass it through a crystal prism, as you have seen it come out on the other side of the prism broken up unto its component colors—red, blue, yellow, violet, orange, and all the colors of the rainbow—so Paul passes this thing, love, through the magnificent prism of his inspired intellect, and it comes out on the other side broken up into its elements. And in these few words we have what one might call the spectrum of love, the analysis of love. Notice that they have common names; they are virtues that we hear about every day; they are things that can be practiced by every person in every walk of life.

Thus, the supreme thing is made up of a multitude of small things and ordinary virtues.

The spectrum of love has nine ingredients:

Patience—"Love suffereth long"

Kindness—"And is kind"

Generosity—"Love envieth not"

Humility—"Love vaunteth not itself,
is not puffed up"

Courtesy—"Doth not behave itself
unseemly"

Unselfishness—"Seeketh not her own"

Good temper—"Is not easily provoked"

Guilelessness—"Thinketh no evil"

Sincerity—"Rejoiceth not in iniquity,
but rejoiceth in the truth"

Patience, kindness, generosity, humility, courtesy, unselfishness, good temper, guilelessness, sincerity—these make up the supreme gift, the stature of the perfect person.

All these qualities are in relation to people, in relation to life, in relation to the known today and the near tomorrow, and not to the unknown eternity. We hear much of love to God; Christ spoke

much of people loving each other. We make a great deal of peace with heaven; Christ made much of peace on earth. Religion is not a strange or added thing, but the inspiration of the secular life, the breathing of an eternal spirit through this temporal world. The supreme thing, in short, is not a thing at all, but the giving of a further finish to the multitudinous words and acts that make up the sum of every common day.

There is not time to do more than make a passing comment about each of these ingredients.

Patience

This is the normal attitude of love; love passive, love waiting to begin; not in a hurry; calm; ready to do its work when the summons comes but meantime wearing the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit. Love suffers long; beareth all things; believeth all things; hopeth all things. For love understands, and therefore waits.

Kindness

Love active. Have you ever noticed how much of Christ's life was spent doing kind things—in *merely* doing kind things? Think about His life with

that in mind, and you will realize that He spent a great proportion of His time simply making people happy, doing good deeds for people. There is only one thing greater than happiness in the world, and that is holiness; we have no power to create holiness in people, but what God has put in our power is the ability to influence those around us to be happy—something we manage largely by being kind to them.

“The greatest thing a man can do for his heavenly Father,” someone once said, “is to be kind to some of His other children.” I wonder why it is that we are not all kinder than we are. How much the world needs it. How easily it is done. How instantaneously it acts. How infallibly it is remembered. How superabundantly it pays itself back—for there is no debtor in the world so honorable as love. “Love never faileth.” Love is success; love is happiness; love is life. “Love,” I say with Browning, “is the energy of Life.”

*For life, with all it yields of joy and woe
And hope and fear,
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love—
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is.*

Where love is, God is. He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God. God is love. Therefore, *love*. Without distinction, without calculation, without procrastination, love. Lavish it on the poor, where it is easy; especially on the rich, who often need it most; most of all on your friends, where it is difficult, and for whom perhaps we each do least of all. There is a difference between *trying to please* and *giving pleasure*. Give pleasure. Lose no chance of giving pleasure. For that is the ceaseless and anonymous triumph of a truly loving spirit. "I will pass through this world but once. Any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

Generosity

"Love envieth not." This is love in competition with others. Whenever you attempt a good work, you will find others doing the same kind of work, and probably doing it better. Do not envy them. Envy is a feeling of ill will toward those who are in the same line as ourselves, a spirit of covetousness and detraction. Even doing Christian work is little protection against harboring this most un-Christian feeling.

That most despicable of all the unworthy moods that cloud a Christian's soul assuredly waits for us on the threshold of every work, unless we are fortified with this grace of magnanimity. The Christian only truly needs to envy one thing: the large, rich, generous soul that "envieth not."

Humility

After having learned all that, you have to learn one thing more: to put a seal upon your lips and forget what you have done. After you have been kind, after love has done its beautiful work, go back into the shade again and say nothing about it. Love hides even from itself. Love waives even self-satisfaction. "Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up."

Courtesy

The fifth ingredient is a somewhat strange one to find. This is love in society, love in relation to etiquette. "Love doth not behave itself unseemly." Politeness has been defined as love in trifles. Courtesy is said to be love in little things. The one secret of politeness is to love. Love *cannot* behave itself unseemly. You can put the most untutored

person into the highest society, and if she has a reservoir of love in her heart, she will not behave unseemly. She simply cannot do it. Carlyle said there was no truer gentleman in Europe than Robert Burns, the plowman poet. It was because he loved everything—the mouse, and the daisy, and all the things, great and small, that God had made. So with this simple passport he could mingle with any society, and enter courts and palaces from his little cottage on the banks of the Ayr. A “gentleman” is a gentle man—a man who does things gently, with love. And that is the whole art and mystery of it. The gentle man cannot do an ungentle, an ungentlemanly thing. The ungentle soul, the inconsiderate, unsympathetic nature, cannot do anything else. “Love doth not behave itself unseemly.”

Unselfishness

“Love seeketh not her own.” Observe: seeketh not even that which is her own. In Great Britain the average citizen is devoted, and rightly, to his or her rights. But there come times when a person may exercise the even higher right of giving up his or her rights. Yet Paul does not summon us to give

up our rights. Love strikes much deeper. It would have us not seek them at all, ignore them, eliminate the personal element altogether from our calculations. It is not hard to give up our rights. They are often external. More difficult is not to seek things for ourselves at all. After we have sought them, bought them, won them, deserved them, we have taken the cream off them for ourselves already. It's a small sacrifice, then, perhaps, to give them up. But not to seek them at all—that is a much deeper and more difficult sacrifice. "Seekest thou great things for thyself?" said the prophet. "*Seek them not.*" Why? Because there is no greatness in *things*. Things cannot be great. The only greatness is unselfish love. Even self-denial in itself is nothing, is almost a mistake. Only a great purpose or a mightier love can justify the waste. It is more difficult, I have said, not to seek our own at all than, having sought it, to give it up. I must take that back. It is only true of a partly selfish heart. Nothing is a hardship to love, and nothing is hard. I believe that Christ's yoke is easy. Christ's "yoke" is just His way of taking life. And I believe it is an easier way than any other. I believe it is a happier way than any other. The most obvious lesson in

Christ's teaching is that there is no happiness in having and getting anything, but only in giving. (I repeat, *there is no happiness in having, or in getting, but only in giving.*) Unfortunately, half the world is on the wrong scent in the pursuit of happiness. They think it comes from having and getting, and in being served by others instead of giving and serving. He that would be great among you, said Christ, let him serve. He that would be happy, let him remember that there is but one way—it is more blessed, it is more happy, to give than to receive.

Good Temper

The next ingredient is a remarkable one. "Love is not easily provoked." Nothing could be more striking than to find this here. We are inclined to look on bad temper as a harmless weakness. We speak of it as a mere infirmity of nature, a family failing, a matter of temperament, not a thing to take into serious account in estimating a person's character. And yet here, right in the heart of this analysis of love, it finds a place; and the Bible again and again returns to condemn it as one of the most destructive elements in human nature.