

What's love got to do with it?

It's a very interesting statement that Paul gives here as he begins to close out the metaphorical clothing of virtues that befit those who belong to Christ Jesus. He says that we are to put one attribute on "over all these". That is, on top of all these virtues should be the covering of a single affection which binds them all together into a single unit, a single outfit, which holds the entire uniform together.

And that is the term, "holds them together." The ESV uses the word "bond", which means something which ties everything up or holds two or more things together. I think that you could substitute, in the clothing metaphor here, "belt". This singular affection is the belt which brings all the other attributes together "into completion." And that's the final description of this belt. Completion. Totality. Perfection. It is the Greek word which describes the end for which something is working, the goal, the finishing of its intended purpose. It is the word which Jesus cried out from the cross, "It has been finished!" The goal for which He came had been completed. He had reached it and accomplished it and paid it fully down.

So, the singular affection which holds all the other virtues together, which brings the heart to a place of compassion, and the means of our compassion to an attitude of kindness, and the manner of our kindness to soft and listening gentleness, and the self-assessment to the self-lowering seat of humility, and the tolerance of patience and self-sacrifice of forgiveness...is the golden thread which runs through all of them, tying up each seam between them, is the affection of love.

Love is the thread which ties them all together to reach the fulfillment of their goal, the purpose for which they are all aimed: the glory of God and the good of the other. So, today I want to look at what love is, how it ties all the other virtues together, and how we are to bind our hearts with it in the manner which brings us into conformation with the one to whom we are united: Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the perfect human.

First of all, what is love? It's a word that is used a lot, but not really evaluated, frankly. We don't truly contemplate what love really is, we just assume that we know because of what we want. We depend upon our desires to define our terms, and that is always a dangerous misconstruing of truth. Truth is not defined by our experience, but our experiences must be defined by truth. We are alterable, but what is eternal is not. It is the same with the definition of love. So, what is love and how do we know?

Love is, very simply, a high level of interest and dedication to the well-being of another. It is more than a feeling, but not less. It is more than an action, but not less. It is both the motive for doing what works for another's best interest, and also the controlling boundary of the means of such activity. It is an affection, a desire, but is a desire which seeks. It is active in both word and deed, in spirit and body. It both drives us and fulfills us in the very act, for love is the reason that we speak or do, but it is also the fulfillment of the words we speak and the activity which we perform. In this way, love is both the cause, the goal and the effect.

Consider it. Why do you do anything? Is it not because you love something? Why do you pay your taxes? I mean, surely you don't love paying taxes, right? Nobody does. If you do...you can pay mine, too...because I love you and want your well-being.

However, you do love your freedom. You pay your taxes because if you don't you will

lose your freedom. You see, we even do the things that we don't like only if it will produce something that we do like. Nobody does the things which they believe will bring about a great evil for themselves, or will destroy them. Even in the throes of addiction we are deceived into believing that such an activity will bring us joy, happiness, peace, rest, or some other good that we love. We are deceived, and sometimes self-deceived, or we are trapped by it, but we believe it to be true.

You see, love is built into the human soul, which is created by God for such a desire and such an affection. And this is no surprise to the Christian, because we have been told that every human is created by God "in His image", that is, to reflect His character and nature as an ambassador of Him in this world, and we also know that God has told us that He is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. The apostle John told us that "God is love, and anyone who does not love does not know God."

Now, we can twist this, being corrupted by sin within us and without us, into loving things inordinately, or out of place. We were created to love God above all else, to have a relatively high interest in His honor, His flourishing, His recognition as great. That is why so many of the Psalms in the Old Testament and so many of the songs throughout the historical narratives in the Old Testament books are about recognizing God's greatness, about honoring Him, about "exalting His name." These are all ways of expressing the end goal of one's love for Him above all else. It's what we call "worship." Worship is simply the expression of one's highest love. We worship what we love the most. What we love is "worthy" of our admiration, our gifts, our pursuits, the works of our hands, our creative efforts, etc. Whatever we have to give, we give to what we count to be the most worthy of it, i.e. worship. And we give gifts to what we

love the most. This is why the greatest commandment in the Bible is acknowledged by Jesus to be, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”

We were created to love, and to love God above all else.

And the second greatest commandment, Jesus commented, is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” You were not only created to love God, but loving Him, to also love your neighbor, your fellow human beings.

This is the love which Paul is admonishing us to put on over all the other virtues, because all these other virtues are relational and should be the manner in which we relate to one another because we are united to Jesus, who is the author of love.

If love is the high level of interest in the well-being of another, and that this characteristic is what perfects, or completes, all the other virtues, then how does it do that? Well, simply put, such interest and purpose in one another’s well-being is what compels all those other virtues. It is the “why” I want to be gentle and kind, the “why” I desire to show patience and forgive when I have been wronged. Why? Because I want the well-being of my brother and I want the flourishing and growth of my sister. I want them to live the full and abundant life which they have been offered in dependence upon Jesus.

In this way, we find that love does something unexpected. ***It hates.*** Yes, love hates. Love is a radical rejection. That’s what hate means, biblically, by the way. It means to vehemently reject, to not choose. So, when the God says, “Jacob I loved, Esau I hated,” it does not imply that God was disgusted with Esau, but that He was not choosing to send the promised redeemer through his line, but through Jacob’s. He rejected Esau as

a bearer of the promises, and that the promise given to Abraham would not come through the firstborn Esau's lineage, but through the second-born Jacob's lineage. God hated Esau as a covenant bearer and loved Jacob as a covenant bearer.

Love chooses against things. It vehemently rejects things. Love is not mere sentimentalism, but is a strong, defending, protecting, self-sacrificially giving of itself to defend its beloved from evil, sin, impurity, the things which would destroy it and draw it away from the Lord.

When Paul wrote the Corinthians, expounding on love, he wrote that "love does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth." Here we see the juxtaposition of love's joys, its rejection and hatred of evil, and its delight and desire for the truth. Therefore, I cannot tell you that I truly love you if I am cherishing evil in my heart. I cannot tell you that I truly love you if I am deceiving you, manipulating you, using you for my own pleasure and advantage. Love must be without hypocrisy, Paul later explained to the Romans. It is the very nature of lunacy to believe that love, if it is the sum of all the virtues, and deception, if it be the nature of vice, should somehow be brought together as one. Genuine Christian love promotes purity, holiness, and the good which God has revealed to be good...in all things and at all times.

If I distance myself from good and toy with the lie, seeking to establish some kind of parlay between them, as if I could, by cuddling corruption harvest health, or by embracing evil I could strengthen serenity. No! Love, in its nature, is a firm and resolute dedication to hate evil and to cling to what is good, to hate the sin which corrupts, even the garment stained by the flesh, says Jude, which is how you show mercy. Love instead runs and pursues and labors for the pure and holy, all which is

consistent with the character and communication of the God who made all which exists and knows how things ought to be for true and abundant life.

You can see it in the very virtues which we have been examining these past few weeks. As that which binds up gentleness and humility, love, then, hates brutality and pride, for it does not seek the well-being, the flourishing, the purity and holiness of the other. As that which binds up kindness and patience, it hates abuse and unforgiveness. You see, to love anyone means that you hate that which harms their well-being, that which decreases their flourishing, that which leads them to sin or to evil. Paul told the Romans, “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” That is what it means when he told them, “Let your love be genuine.” Love hates evil. Love hates sin. Love hates that which harms the object of its love.

A loving God is also a wrathful God. Some may question how this can be, or say, “I have trouble with this.” We tend to be taken aback by the thought that God could be angry. How can a deity who is perfect and loving ever be angry? But love detests what destroys the beloved. Real love stands against the deception, the lie, the sin that destroys. Nearly a century ago the theologian **E.H.Gifford** wrote: **‘Human love here offers a true analogy: the more a father loves his son, the more he hates in him the drunkard, the liar, the traitor.’**

You see, hate isn’t the opposite of love, it is a component of it that is simply directed at whatever would harm its object. Indifference is the opposite of love. It simply doesn’t care enough about its object to be concerned with its harm or destruction or abuse.

Rebecca Pippert wrote in her book, *Hope Has its Reasons*, “How can a good God forgive bad people without compromising himself? Does he just play fast and loose with the facts? ‘Oh, never mind...boys will be boys’. Try telling that to a survivor of the Cambodian ‘killing fields’ or to someone who lost an entire family in the Holocaust. No. To be truly good one has to be outraged by evil and implacably hostile to injustice.”

Thus, love works against that which would lead another to sin and works for that which will lead another to holiness, to the way that they are designed to be, by God, for God, and in the worship of God.

And that is how our union with Christ Jesus is the foundation of this kind of profound other-centered and other-edifying love. Because in Christ Jesus we see that God’s love was poured out in its fullness, not merely in showing mercy towards us but also in showing wrath and hatred towards sin, and all of this is furiously showered upon Jesus Christ in our place. In His substitution for us, in our union with Him, God’s wrath against sin and that which destroys our very hearts, corrupts our souls, and the creation which He loves, is utterly poured out in a cosmic fury that the world has never seen and never will see again. **At the cross of Christ the very Cosmos responded, the sun was blocked out, the ground shook.**

When Jesus revealed Himself to John, as written in the book of the Revelation, John noted that all of Heaven became silent before the judgement of God was poured out against sin. The severity of God’s love, His protection of His beloved, His redemption of their wayward souls, His rage against the wickedness of our souls which corrupted the edges of His good world like mildew, was poured out in the manner of judgment against such injustice, not the absence of judgment against it.

For God's love is not mere sentimentalism, some Hallmark ignorance of evil or absolution without expense. God's love cost Him something, something dear, something exceedingly valuable. For God to be both just and merciful, it cost Him the life of His Son, the irreplaceable, only-eternal, uniquely righteous and good and true and beautiful one. Beauty had to die to redeem the hideous. Jekyll had to be executed to redeem Hyde. And this, this is the good news: God is judgmental against evil. And God is merciful towards evil ones who turn to trust in Him because this judgement is poured out upon their representative instead of on them. The Love of God is expressed through judgment, not in spite of it, but through it. Thus, when Christ died, you who are united to Him by faith, you died and were judged, too.

And this reality is the foundation of our love for one another. Because our evil has been judged by God in Christ Jesus, because all who believe in Him have been judged already, and have already paid down all that is necessary, then there is no more debt to be paid, no more judgment to be borne, no more wrath or disappointment in the heart of God towards them. *Therefore, you are free from fear.*

As John told us, **“perfect love throws fear out.”** Why? Because fear involves judgement and in the gospel, in our union with Christ, judgment is fulfilled and spent and exhausted. *All that is left is belonging, acceptance, delight, joy...the smile of God, the inheritance of God, the freedom of a child to wander the gardens of her Father's estate in the full knowledge that she belongs there and that her Father delights in her completely, utterly, and certainly, because her older brother, her Jesus, has taken care of everything needed.* All that remains for the believer in Jesus is the love of God.

When we believe this, we are free to love others purely for their sake. Because we don't need anything from anyone else. We have all that we need in our Father's delight. We don't need to belong to other people, because we know that we have an inheritance being kept in heaven for us, guarded by the power of God Himself, reserved for you for all eternity. Now, it is good and right to be loved by others, but when they don't, it does not devastate the one who is loved by God. It hurts to be rejected by men. It hurts like hell, but it is not hell.

There is much to say about love, and I would argue that each of these virtues that we have examined the past few weeks is really a study on love, and there are many more to consider. There are many, many good writings which help us understanding what God means by love and its value as the summary of all which is good and how its misappropriated aim is the bane of all human relationships.

But, for now, let me simply look at one other aspect of this love which binds all these other virtues together. **Love binds these all together because it delights.** It does not rejoice in evil, but it does delight. It delights in the good. Love rejoices, it is glad to be gentle, to be humble, and to be patient, because it is glad for others to be well. You see, love may not be mere sentimentalism, but it is not without sentiment.

Love delights. Love rejoices. Love is glad. Love dances over its beloved with great joy. This is what Jonathan Edwards meant when he described love as, *"Placing one's happiness in the happiness of another."* Isn't that great? Placing one's happiness in the happiness of another. Now, happiness had to be defined, which Edwards did, and included holiness, by the way, but the joy and gladness, the happiness, the smile of love,

is of its very nature. Love may scowl at the evil threatening its beloved, but its breaks into a great grin when it gazes upon its friend.

It is the grin of the groom when he sees his beloved bride presented at the aisle. It is the laughter of the father as he sweeps up his child who has just taken her first two steps. It is the contented sigh of a mom of teenagers whose many friends have filled her family room to play games and laugh together. She rejoices in their joy, is happy in their happiness. She loves them.

The reason that we have to put on these virtues is because sometimes the ones whom we love rejoice in sin, or foolishness, or that which brings them harm. Then, we must love grievously, we must, in that battle between love's joy and love's hate, bear up another's cross and suffer the slings and arrows which come in the presence of danger. We must love hard. Does that make sense? Love's delight and love's hatred will be thrown into conflict in the presence of sin. So, what does love do?

It puts on its compassionate heart, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance, and prepares to give itself away for the protection and well-being of the one whom it loves, even if that loved one does not appreciate it. And how can it do this? Because it is fully loved by God and it is united to Christ Jesus as its belonging.

In this way, our union with Christ, our belonging with God, protects from those codependent relationships where we only love when we are loved well in return. You know the ones, those relationships where we are afraid to do two things in the presence of a sinning brother. *First, we are afraid to hate the evil and speak genuinely.* We fear losing their appreciation, their nearness, we don't want to lose them, so we soften the

consequences of their sin and enable them to continue to do that which destroys them.

Why? Out of fear. Remember, *perfect love casts out fear*.

Or, we lose our delight in their well-being. We lose our delight in them. We drift away, we let them wander towards the cliff because they hurt us, and they slung an arrow at us when we tried to help. Rather than rejoice in their well-being, we numb ourselves to their condition and deceive ourselves into thinking that everything will be fine...but without me having to actively seek their good. We stop coming near, but not out of a desire for their good, but merely out of self-protection and fear. Remember, *perfect love casts out fear*.

So, how shall we love well? How shall we find that perfect balance of love's joy in others and love's hatred of that which harms them? Well, look at the perfect balance of these two things in the singular person of Jesus.

Jesus loved perfectly. He loves you perfectly. And what does that look like? *First, of all, his love is not dependent upon your worthiness...*of any kind. It is not rooted in your holiness. It is working towards it, guaranteeing it, but not rooted in it or dependent upon it at all. He may discipline us, but its because *He loves us as His sons*. He works for our holiness, not because we have proved ourselves worthy, but because He loves us.

Jesus does not bind Himself to you, and you to Him, because of the depth of your theological understanding, the greatness of your faith, the depths of your joy, the passion of your love for Him, or precociousness of your prayers. He loves you...because He loves you.

And we can't even depend upon our faith. That would be putting our faith in our faith, which is logically ridiculous. No, we put our faith in Him, in a person, in the very particular person who is faithful to His promise, and who holds the keys to death and the grave, and who inherits all that God has to give. Our union with Him is not granted to us from a resistant heart, as if he would rather not, but he has to because he made some rash vow to do so.

No, his love is a settled love, a perseverant love, so settled and certain and perseverant that it compelled him not to a mere one-time choice, but to an eternal choice made through a lifetime of steps which led from the self-effacing birth to an unwed mother in the small town of an occupied land all the way to the shameful unjust execution at the hands of those occupiers even though he had all the power in the cosmos to defend himself and set himself free. He chose to be the one rejected for you, to become as the one hated, as if He were the greatest threat to your well-being.

What does the Scripture mean when it says, "He made Him who knew no sin *to be sin on our behalf*, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21)? It means that God's love for you treated Jesus as the one hated, the drunkenness, the betrayal, the lie. Why did He do this? To obtain you for the Father and for Himself, to place His joy of redeeming you in your joy of being redeemed, and that was a choice made before the foundations of the world were ever laid and was lived out every day for over 33 years of his life, every step of pain, every blow from wicked men, every slanderous word against him, every unjust accusation, every hungry morning, every cold and sleepless night...he made the choice before you had ever done anything worthy, or thought anything noble, or acted with any wisdom. He loves you first...He

loves you fully...He loves you with the love which delights in you and explodes from the only unfettered heart in existence...the heart of the infinite, uncreated, and holy God.

That, my friends, is the good news of Jesus, the One anointed for such a task, who said that He came into the world to seek and to save the lost, to give to His people life, and abundant life at that. You see, your life, your redeemed, sanctified, found life is the joy of Jesus. Look at how Isaiah wrote it out, by the Spirit of God:

Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." ¹² And they shall be called The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD; ^band you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken. (Isa. 62:11-12)

Do you see that? What is the reward of the LORD who comes to save? It is His people! They shall be called Holy, the Redeemed, Not Forsaken, and Sought Out! You have trouble believing this, because you think that you're not worthy. You're not. His love for you is not based upon your worthiness. Since when is true love, the compassionate, gentle, humble, patient, forgiving love ever based upon worthiness? You are not loved because you are worthy! You are worth it because you are loved by such a tremendously loving God!

And when you believe this, when you deep down seize onto this truth as the greatest truth which has ever touched the heart of any person, you will rest in your union with Jesus. You will rest in the love of God towards you. You will seek to walk in a manner

worthy of Him, in holiness and purity, as those who, united to Christ, have already been judged for our wickedness and foolishness AND have been deeply loved and cherished and raised to new life by God.

And you will love others, not for what you can gain from them, but for what you can give to them, to build them up, to purify them, to help them see Jesus as their hope, no matter the consequences or the risks. You will endure like your Savior for the same reason that He was willing to risk everything for you...because you entrust your very Life to the Father who loves you. That is how love ties all these things together.

May the grace of God open the eyes of your hearts to behold the severe mercies of God in the light of His extravagant love for you, so that you turn today from your sins, your self-trust, your fearful anxieties, and fly to Jesus Christ as your hope of redemption, of joy, of the abundant life provided in Him, and in Him alone. Amen.