

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Power for Christian Living: The Power of Love

This morning we come to our third look at the resources available to the Christian. Let us begin by reading together a part of those famous words that Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers concerning love. "Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails ... And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 and 13.

In these broadcasts, we have already looked at faith and hope. Before we look at the power of love, it is important to understand why it rests supreme amongst these three virtues. Unlike faith and hope, love is an integral part of the character of God (1 John 4:8). As we display love in our lives, we are reflecting the very nature of God. Equally the love we say we have for God is measured by the love we have for our fellow man.

Faith and hope lead us on to a better appreciation of God. Love is an end in itself, and most surely comes from a better understanding of God. Faith and hope are essentially for my benefit, whereas love takes us out of ourselves, for others are always the beneficiaries of our love. So we can see amongst these three great Christian qualities, love reigns supreme.

So how can the power of love affect my life? So much has been written about love, in poems and songs, that to add anything new to the subject must almost be an impossible task. And yet we still have such difficulty with the practical display of love. Increasing levels of family breakdown and abuse, arguments amongst different groups of Christians, increasing violence in society and internationally bear solemn testimony to the fact that we know very little of true biblical love. Many, having been let down, feel that love is an impossible ideal, a road to hurt and pain. Hopefully this morning, in the lives of four individuals we shall see that love is possible, but only when it springs from a knowledge of the ultimate source of all love.

Love bears all things.

In the New International Version, the very first mention of love in the Bible comes in Genesis 20:13. So much is made about the first rush of romantic love. So many love songs have been written about when a boy meets a girl. One might almost think that this first blossoming of love would prove the strongest. Yet it is not so. Of all the words that could be used to describe Sarah, perhaps steadfast is the best. Abraham was a great dreamer, an idealist. So he shares his dream of a promised land with Sarah. In almost missionary fervour she consents to leaving everything behind, following him on a road with no clear end in view. And yet it is not in this way that Sarah demonstrates her greatest love for Abraham. So many marriages start off with great dreams and idealistic aims for the future. It is much later that the power of Sarah's love shines brightest. For the second time in her married life, Sarah is massively let down by her husband. As he dwells in Gerar, ruled by King Abimelech, he tells Sarah to pretend that she is his sister, not his wife. What an abject denial of all she deserved! Abraham does nothing less than ask Sarah to put her neck on the block rather than his. He puts her into real danger, so that he can protect himself. She might easily have been raped and taken into Abimelech's harem, or worse. Staggeringly Sarah agrees. She never lost sight of the man Abraham was to become. The father of a nation wasn't born that way; he became such through life's ups and downs. Through thick and thin, Sarah stands shoulder to shoulder with Abraham, knowing in her heart that he would rise again to become the man that God had called him to be. In agreeing to Abraham's request, Sarah was indicating that his vision was more important than her life.

You say you love Jesus as your Saviour. In all likelihood, you will sing of your love for Him today. So prove it now. Love is not a word or a feeling. It is God at work through us. So today, this week and for the rest of your life let this sacrificial love be a feature of your relationship within the family, and the Christian fellowship. What a tremendous thing my life would be if I was prepared continuously to bear another's failure to my own cost. If I claim to love God, then I should be ready to pay the price of another's failure to allow them the time to grow to be the person that God wants them to be. Sarah has rarely received the acclaim she deserves. She bore with personal famine, a wandering husband, and a spouse who denied her the respect she deserved. This all sounds so twenty-first century. In her steadfast, unswerving loyalty to Abraham, she stands in judgement on so many today, who drift apart, making no

effort to sustain a relationship. It is impossible to know just how many tears fell from Sarah's eyes as she tenaciously, almost single-handedly at times, maintained her marriage. It cannot have been easy, and yet she did not give up, for love bears all things.

Love believes all things.

Was Sarah's love misplaced? Not at all, for in Genesis 22 we see its fruit. Let us read together the dramatic events of Genesis 22:2-10: "And God said, "Take now your son, your only Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you." So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." And the two of them went together. Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son."

It is at this point that God steps in to intervene, and stops Abraham from sacrificing his son. What God did not demand from Abraham, He Himself would do, in sacrificing His Son, to be able righteously to forgive a sinful world. What an awful test Abraham had to endure! His love for his only son would not have been in doubt, and yet he was prepared to offer him back to God. I remember the time when my youngest son fell from a jetty and cut his head open. As we waited for an ambulance, his eyes started to roll into the top of his head, and for a brief moment, I thought he was dying. The feeling was awful. I wasn't ready for that. Even when he was safe in hospital that night I couldn't sleep fearing the worst. And yet, I can only begin to understand what emotions must have been raging in Abraham's breaking heart. However, in amongst those emotions was the rock solid assurance that all would come good in the end. God had promised so much through Isaac, and clearly Abraham had some sense of this for he tells his servants to wait until he and his son came back to them. Abraham held on to what God had said and it was this that sustained him through the heat of trial. Love, then, enables us to hold on to what God has said even through the severest of trials. Sadly, we live in an age of general half-heartedness. So many just give up at the first signs of spiritual hardship. We say we believe that God is in control, that He will work all things to the good of them that love Him, but give up as soon as life becomes difficult. Real Christian love enables us to stand firm when everyone else around us falls away. Sometimes we are driven to our knees, and with tears cry out for help. We are unable to see the way ahead, not even a light at the end of the tunnel, and yet know that through it all, He is able to keep us. We may not be able to understand His ways with us now, but that does not really matter. Love would tell us that His promise to be with us, to bring us safely home, should be enough. Jesus told His disciples, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Christianity is not a package of optional extras that we can pick and choose at will. It is a relationship with Jesus, based upon His word. To try to build a relationship, whilst ignoring a part of His word, or overemphasising another part, is to counterfeit what is real. Imagine if Abraham had decided just to go and pray with Isaac, or to sacrifice something else. He would have failed utterly, and missed out on learning so much about his God. So too we, when we disobey God's word, cheat only ourselves and miss out on His best for our lives. Love gives us the spiritual energy to pursue His way without fainting; knowing that His will is best, for love believes all things.

Love hopes all things.

Love is not blind, nor is it naïve. It does not believe something to be true when it is plainly not. Yet when love is disappointed by the actions of others, so it continues to hope for a better future. The natural human tendency, when someone fails us, is to protect ourselves and to reject the one who has let us down. Love would keep us from this, hoping for a brighter tomorrow.

We see this beautifully illustrated for us in the story of Hosea. Poor Hosea, how costly it was for him to obey his God. He is told to marry a wife, Gomer, whom God knew would be unfaithful to Hosea. They have children, whose names accurately reflect the state of the nation of Israel. But Gomer turns to prostitution, and sinks to a pretty low state. Now God comes to Hosea again and tells him to go and buy back his wife. How humiliating for a man in his position! And yet Hosea does all this. But his love for Gomer would not tolerate second best for her. So in Hosea 3:3 we read: "And I said to her, 'You shall stay with me many days; you shall not play the prostitute, nor shall you have a man; thus I will also be toward you.'" Tough love is nothing new! Hosea would not give up on Gomer but he would not accept less than the best for her, and her prostitution was certainly not the best. Of course, the life of Hosea was nothing less than an object lesson to Israel, and we in the Church have behaved just like Israel. You see love will not give up just because it is disappointed. So, later in the book of Hosea we get an insight into the very heart of God, as He cries out, "O Ephraim, what shall I do to you? O Judah, what shall I do to you?" (6:4) By chapter 11 we read, "How can I give

you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? ...My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger." (11:8-9).

God had wanted nothing but the best for Israel, and yet He had been let down so often. Still His love for them would hope for a return to Him in repentance and so His judgement upon them is not final. Even today, Israel holds a special place in the heart of God, and will in a day to come play a central role in the plans of God. Time and time again, God could have cast Israel aside in judgement because of her disobedience. Love's hope for a better tomorrow kept Him from pursuing such a course.

As we look at our own lives, do we not also see such an opportunity? So often we may be let down and hurt by the actions of others. The natural reaction is to become like a hedgehog. We hide our vulnerability underneath a coat of prickly hardness. So often we are ready to believe the worst in another, to act as judge and jury before we even know the facts of a matter. Love would keep us from this path. It would keep us ever open and sensitive to the needs of others, always believing the best of another, until proved otherwise, and then always looking for a brighter future. Many of us are familiar with the game show that includes the harsh words, "You are the weakest link. Goodbye". Well love would say, "You were the weakest link, but perhaps next time you will be stronger, and this is how I think you can achieve that". Such behaviour is costly, and will inevitably lead to my being hurt, but then isn't that an opportunity for Him to heal the wounds. The Lord dealt with the woman taken in adultery in just this way. His words to her, "neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more" are so full of love. He would not condemn, for He Himself would soon pay the penalty, in blood, for her adultery. But He also tells her to sin no more. She could be so much better than what she had been. Beneath the sinful exterior, Jesus saw the beautiful woman she could become. So often we never take the time, or make the effort, to look beneath the surface of another's actions. It is so much easier just to condemn.

Love endures all things.

Let us read together the regulations concerning Hebrew slaves, in Exodus 21:2-6: "If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing. If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself. But if the servant plainly says, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free," then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the door-post, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for ever."

God did not want His people to be in unwilling slavery for life, and so He made provision for their release after six years of service. It is not difficult to imagine the excitement felt by the servant as the time drew near for his release. However, that excitement may well have been tempered by anxiety or grief, if the servant had been given a wife by his master, for the wife and any children would still belong to the master. So there was an option that allowed for the family to stay together, although it was a bit like pressing the big red nuclear button! If the love the servant had for his wife was such that he could not leave her, then he could plainly state his love for his master, wife and children. In such a case, in view of all the judges and quite publicly the servant would have his ear drilled through. Such a mark would indicate that for the rest of his life, the servant would remain a servant. There would be, there could be no going back. Two years down the line, if the servant fell out with his wife, he would still remain his master's servant. If his wife died, he would still face a life of service. Now, of course, the Lord Jesus Himself best answers to this Hebrew servant. As a perfect Man, He obeyed His Father in everything. At the cross, He plainly said, "I love My master, My wife, and My children (the church); I will not go out free." Even now, in heaven He acts as a perfect servant, such is His love for us.

There might have been days when the master mistreated his servant, or when the servant and his wife argued, that regrets for his decision would have surfaced. Still there was no going back. This is the sort of love that we need in our lives today. Disappointments and adversity are a normal part of human life, and persecution is an integral part of Christianity. The temptation to give up in the face of hardship can, at times, be overwhelming. And yet love would keep our hearts steadfastly fixed on Him. No service we do for Him can ever begin to repay Him for all that He has already done for us. Like the servant in Luke 17, we can only admit to being unprofitable servants, to only doing our duty. We live in such an instant society – people live just for the moment. As Christians we need to be seen to be radically different. When we love someone, we need to do so wholeheartedly and forever. You see, love is a unilateral act. God loved us, not because we were particularly loveable, or deserving, but because He is love. So we, in turn, should love one another, not because of a response we may get, but because of a conscious act of will. My wife loves me, not because I am lovely, or because I love her, but because she has chosen to love me without end. Such a love is so liberating because it expects nothing, but stands ready to give everything. Even when love is not returned it persists, because love endures all things.

We have looked at four real people this morning. The love they displayed was a real love, a costly love, a hard love. In the love of a wife for her husband, a father for his son, a husband for his unfaithful wife, and a servant for his master and wife, we have covered many human relationships. In all cases, the love given was costly. An easier path would

have beckoned, and yet love could not be denied. Hard choices had to be made, which did not rely upon emotional satisfaction. The challenge for us today is clear. Are we prepared to love our family, our fellow believers, and the world in general in such a way? There are times when we must forgo what we believe to be our rights, to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others, like Sarah. There are times when we must crush our natural desires and look towards the goal, rather than at immediate circumstances, like Abraham. There are times when we must continue to love someone when they have behaved in a way that has hurt us, and caused us real pain, like Hosea. And there are times when we must deny ourselves so that we may express our love for one another. Is such a love possible? It is not only possible but, as we have seen this morning in the lives of these Old Testament saints, it is expected of us. It is normal Christianity. Sometimes we may fail to live up to these ideals. What a comfort it is to know then, that despite ourselves, God still loves us. His love for us will never diminish. It will ensure that we are kept until that day when God presents us to His Son, a perfect bride, a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish.

Until that day, then, let us love one another as He has loved us.

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