

LOVE ABOVE ALL

U.S. yet shut down a suspected spy balloon belonging to China, and for at least on this case, most Americans agreed the only criticism by some is that it took so long before the Biden administration approved the shooting down of the spy balloon. But China's reaction as might be expected was one of condemnation claiming that it was for civilian use. This is a case where an English expression very well applies. You may have heard of the expression, no love lost.

It refers to a relationship that is polite and serial, but really the two parties are hating each other.

That happens between business rivals, when they meet, they may be polite, but they are competitors and they may hate each other in business terms.

It happens in political rivalry, again, when they meet, they may be polite and serial, but there is no love between them, and so when a hostile act is done by one against the other, no love is going to be lost, and that is the meaning of that expression, no love lost.

Now, while that may be expected of the world, that should not be the characteristic of the Church, because the Church should be pervaded with love of brethren for one another, and that is the reason why when there is conflict, when there is hostility, much love is deemed by such conflict when it is mishandled.

Now, I do not believe that February is a month that has more love in it than any other month, but we can capitalize on the fact that love is a discourse that is very much around during the month of February, and it is appropriate to refresh what to us is the distinctive of Christian love.

And whenever a discourse on Christian love, or whether it is about the love of God or the love of the Christian as a grace, I find it necessary to make a negation, and that is to say that Christian love is not the sentimental emotion that it has become and been reduced to in the average notion of today.

It is a grace, a product of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a true believer.

It is not without emotion, but it is above, and it transcends emotion in its exercise of that love.

It is a principle.

It is a character that is built and transformed in a person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, one thing that is underscored in the New Testament is its superior rank if you make a ranking of Christian graces.

In fact, there are several New Testament passages that rank love as superior.

You may know of 1 Corinthians 13 that says these three love, faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.

So there you have an explicit ranking and putting love above other graces.

But I will use a more simple text that I will draw from it, two messages today and the Lord willing next Lord's Day, and I will invite you to turn your Bibles with me to 1 Peter chapter 4 and verse 8, this one text.

But let me begin reading just one verse before, 1 Peter 4, verses 7 and 8.

The end of all things is at hand, therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

Love all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

Now, what do you expect an apostle like Peter to write to believers who are suffering from persecution?

You would expect him to exhort them to endurance and persevering faith, and Peter does that.

You would also expect a Christian apostle to point to the Lord Jesus Christ as a good example of endurance and perseverance and even meekness in the face of maltreatment of others and his own suffering.

Also Peter does that very well in this letter.

But one thing that perhaps you may not expect as much is that he would insist on the exercise of Christian love for one another, at least not in the immediate sense.

But out of the passage stands out this emphasis that Christians who share the suffering of

persecution by unbelievers in the time that Peter was writing, one thing that is required of them is that they must love one another.

And the words that stand out in this exhortation are the words, above all.

You may expect that there should be love among brethren.

You may expect an apostle like Peter to exhort suffering believers to love one another.

But perhaps you do not expect that he would say that it has in its rank being above all other graces.

Above all, that is what Peter says, keep loving one another earnestly.

So I intend to divide this into two messages using the first part of the exhortation now and then the second part next week, that love covers a multitude of sins.

But for my first message, it is this, Christian love ranks above all as characterizing the bonds of brethren.

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Now the words above all in the original may sometimes be understood in a sequential sense, meaning love first and then you can do the rest.

But that cannot apply here and that does not apply to Christian experience.

Love is not first in sequence when it comes to Christian graces.

In the experience of salvation, it is faith first.

In fact, it is faith alone when it comes to justification or acquittal of a sinner before the judgment bar of God.

It is not love that is required of you.

And this is something that has a very subtle message from false teachers and cults and even mainstream churches who will insist that we need to love God and that is of course the greatest commandment and that is made to be the means of salvation when you love God and that is wrong and that is in fact a subtle false teaching.

What is insisted upon as first for salvation is faith.

Without faith, the writer of Hebrews tells us, it is impossible to please God.

So faith is first.

If there is a difference between love and faith, I will put it this way, love as we will define it later is self-giving.

The giving of self to someone that is loved.

Faith is self-abundantment.

It is abandoning self in order to cast oneself upon the Lord Jesus Christ and I am telling you, you will not be saved until you abandon your own self-merit, your own self-ritual, your own self-ground of salvation for as long as you have a ground in yourself.

For God to accept you, you will not understand the gospel because the gospel's call is faith which means abandon all self-ground and basis for salvation to cast yourself only in Jesus Christ.

That is salvation and that is the first thing required of anyone who will become a follower of Jesus Christ.

Love comes later but when the graces begin to grow in a believer, in a follower of Christ, what is most important, what is first in ranking is love.

So that love can now define your faith, love can now define your labor, love can now define all the other graces you exercise so it is not first in sequence.

Peter's point is that it is first in rank.

It is first in terms of defining the other graces and there are two concerns for Peter why he describes love in its superior rank.

Why does he say above all keep loving one another?

The two first is the demand for persistence, demand for persistence and the second is the degree of earnestness, the degree of earnestness.

So in these two ways, Peter is underscoring the rank of love as above all because it is love that will be able to keep our graces persistent as well as earnest in degree.

So first of all is the demand for persistence.

Now in the original of the Apostle Peter, it is not quite precisely translated in English, love is noun.

In other words, he is not asking for an action of love, love is a noun, it is there, it is a grace that is in the Christian's heart.

The actual word actually is keep having, keep possessing or keep exercising. So in other words, you have that love in your heart, if you are a true believer, the seed of love has already germinated in your heart because you are a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, but now he is exhorting his readers, keep having it.

What does that imply?

It implies the possibility that there can be situations when love will fluctuate and sometimes come to a point that is close to being kneeled, close to being absent, much coldness can characterize a believer.

So if the Christian is to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ in his obedience and that his graces are in the right exercise, above them all is to have love.

Now if those other graces will themselves be deficient in the way we exercise them, why is that the case?

Well, the simple observation is that there will always be challenges among brethren to cease loving one another.

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We sometimes wish that love is like some of our salvation blessings, especially those that in theology we call legal blessings of salvation, salvation blessings that deal with God's judgment.

We are justified, or the more legal term is acquitted from our sins permanently when we are in Christ.

It does not grow, it does not fluctuate, it is permanent.

The saints in heaven already are not more justified than the saints on earth.

Justification is always the same, it does not fluctuate.

But you see, love does not belong to justification, love belongs to sanctification, that is, growing in holiness, which is what we have been studying in Sunday school.

And growing in holiness, the very fact that we speak of growing, means that the opposite can happen.

We are not growing, and instead we are even becoming deficient, we are decreasing in love, in sanctification, and thus love as a grace can decrease, and in some cases even come to the point of being almost absent because of its coldness.

Now there can be a number of reasons why love for the brethren fluctuates and deans, and sometimes ceases.

The reason may be the provocation of the brother or sister we wish to love in a Christian way, he may exhibit characters that make it hard, even for those close to him, to love him, and so in the church.

Often the provocation comes from the abuse of the tongue, the tongue.

James 3 says, the tongue is a fire that sets forests ablaze.

That's the power of the tongue.

And by tongue I include its extension of modes of communication, even when in print, digitized, or however you communicate, that is an extension of your tongue.

And some do not care how their communication is offensive to others in an unnecessary way.

And they justify it by saying, well I'm honest, I speak my mind.

No you don't.

You don't speak your mind, you think with your mind.

And when you think your mind rightly, there will be things that your mind will tell you that is not appropriate to say.

It is not right to say it.

So don't justify hurting others unnecessarily by saying I'm just the kind of person who speaks his mind, if that is your habit, speaking your mind will start thinking with your mind rather than speaking your mind.

Others make it hard for brethren to love them because they live in a world that is revolving on them.

They are self-sufficient, they prefer not to assimilate with brethren, and they want to think that the church exists for them.

But the fluctuation of love may not be because of the brethren, but the cause may be in yourself. There may be self-importance.

Now Peter's very concise, above all, keep loving one another, has a more extended exhortation

in the version of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2 and verse 3, when he said, do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but consider others better than yourselves.

Now that does not mean that they are better in gifts, when you actually are better than is nothing wrong, making an evaluation that a person does not have as much gift or probably has no gift at all in certain ministries of the church.

It's not saying that.

What Apostle Paul means is that in terms of service, you serve others because they are better served than you are served by them.

That's the attitude of servanthood, and remember that Paul adds to those words one of the greatest Christological passages in the New Testament known as the karmen kristi, the hymn to Christ.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but became a servant.

Now that mind which Jesus had and for if there is anyone who deserves serving, it is our Lord Jesus.

It is our trying God, but instead the Lord Jesus voluntarily humbled Himself and condescended to become a servant, and if that mind is in us, then we will have a mind of servanthood instead of self-importance.

And when your attitude is to love only those you find lovable because they are vibes with your personality and temperament, you will be in for disappointment in the church.

Instead you find challenges.

If you think that you are entering into the church and find there the most lovable people on earth, again you will be disappointed.

You will find there the most challenges to love in a Christian way.

But that is what exactly we need to learn.

This month of February in America is also considered Black History Month.

I do not agree much with the ideology that is behind it, but the reason why this was chosen as Black History Month is because two of the great personalities that had influence in the freedom of slaves, the black slaves in America, were Abraham Lincoln, the president of the United States then, who was born in February 12, 1809, and another was a former slave, Frederick Douglass, who was also born in February of 1818.

And that shows black and white and a free man and a slave being able to join together, both professing the Christian faith and join together in order to advance the cause of the liberation of slaves.

And that is the kind of love that should be seen in the church.

So my challenge is to search out and overcome the hindrances to your love for brethren as there are many challenges, so we need to search out.

When Paul was encouraging mutual acceptance of brethren in the church of Rome in his letter to the Romans, he minds the differences, but then he says this in Romans 15, 7, receive one another just as Jesus Christ also receives us to the glory of God.

The basis of my acceptance of a brother or sister, the basis of my love giving my heart to the person who is my brother or sister in the church is not because our personalities agree or our temperaments are in vibes or whatever it is that are shallow and emotional and sentimental.

The reason that Paul gives and attaches to accepting one another in the church is that Jesus Christ has received him.

Strong and weak are the differences that Paul has in mind in the church of Rome.

Those who are knowledgeable and those who have little knowledge, and we can extend that to all kinds of gaps that exist between brethren, the educated and the not so educated, those who are doctrinally mature and those who are just beginning, those who have a certain personality and another of an opposite kind, but whatever it is, the reason that is attached by Paul, why we need to love one another and accept one another is because Christ also receives us.

If you place something else for the words, as Jesus Christ receives him, it will be very tempting to put, as I find him acceptable or helpful or as we agree, but that is not what Paul says.

But as Jesus Christ has received him, now this is the sense of Peter's insistence, keep loving one another.

It is depicted here as something you need to keep.

If you do not watch its keeping, it may be lost without your knowing it.

This takes over, and soon indifference will become resentment and bitterness, and then soon instead of love, hatred can take over.

For lack of love, some choose not to show up in the church, others attend without the blessing of fellowship, and all because of this lack of love.

In the context of Peter, imagine how much more vulnerable Christians would be to persecution when they have no companion in love of the brethren.

And in our context, how much more we yield to the friendship of the world, if not persecution, because we sometimes think there is none in the church, but the fault is that you have fallen short of Peter's appeal.

Peter's appeal is above all, keep loving.

I already mentioned Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States.

He is a model of persistence.

Whether you think of his political career, in most elections he participated in, he lost and then won the presidency.

And when he was determined to liberate the slaves, there was so much opposition, it erupted into a civil war.

And there were more Americans who died during the civil war of 1861 to 1865 than there were American fatalities in World War II.

It was a bitter civil war between the North and the South which owned slaves.

But so determined was Lincoln that slaves are the equal of whites that he had the emancipation passed on January 1 of 1863.

There is persistence when you believe something about your brethren, no matter how different they look, no matter how different they are in personality and temperament, no matter how disagreeable sometimes their behavior may be, there must be persistence and only love can do it.

Only love is the grace that will enable other graces to be exercised within the context of the church.

That's why it's first, that's why it's above all demand for persistence.

But there is a second reason and that is the degree of earnestness.

Peter is not satisfied with just the persistence of love, but take note, he attaches the word keep loving one another earnestly.

His word is the idea of intensity.

It is the opposite of what we say just in us, what we Filipinos love to say, puede na.

No, Peter says it must be a love that cannot be satisfied until it can be felt and experienced by the one love.

It is often used literally of fire and fire can be intense.

You cannot be close to fire without feeling it, feeling its intensity of heat until a quenching substance puts it out.

What is the quenching substance in the context of the church?

I'll tell you what, it's self-occupation.

Self-occupation is the major quencher of fervent love for the brethren, ang pag atupag sareeli ang tumutupo sa init nang pag idig sakapathiran.

Now love, as I've said by definition, is the outgoing of the heart to others.

You become others-oriented.

Now this is true even of God.

God decided in eternity past that He will create a people who will be the object of His love, and in order to show that love, He would send His Son.

God is Himself giving, the giving of His Son, and He can give no higher gifts than that of His Son.

And that is why there is no salvation outside of union with the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you are looking for salvation in your church, in your works, in your morality, you're damned.

Salvation is in the one God gave for the salvation of sinners, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

But that is love.

It is self-giving, the giving of oneself to others.

But self-interest keeps on quenching that occupation with others, especially in the context of Peter's letter in times of suffering.

You would expect self-interest to say, I have enough of suffering in my hands, why would I add others suffering?

So that is the very characteristic of the church, bear one another's burden.

It's not saying that it's when your burden is bearable, you can probably take some of the burdens of others and add it on your own as long as they are bearable.

No, it says, bear one another's burden.

The attitude of I will be bearing my burden first before I think of others, that will be challenged by Peter's words again above all, and that includes above all your self-interest. But the mantra of the world is self-first.

The greatest love of all is to love yourself, they say.

Now, this is something that this word of Peter will challenge.

We would probably easily go along with Peter's words, love one another, if he had not added the word earnestly, but he does.

You would have loved if it is according to our low standard of what it means to love.

But Peter says, during times of suffering, during times of persecution and maltreatment, you love one another earnestly.

You may say that is impossible, but that is exactly the evidence that the Lord Jesus has transformed us by His cross.

There is much of the cross in the first letter of Peter, and it is presented by Peter as an act of redemption, redemption in the sense of liberating by paying a price, and the price Peter says is more precious than gold.

It is the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, 1 Peter 1.18.

But then he follows it with the subsidiary importance of not only the ransom of sinners, and my friend, there is no other redemption than in the blood of the Lord Jesus.

But for Christians, Peter adds, it is also an example of suffering, so that you may follow where he has walked.

You must walk even as he walked, and he is talking about the fact that when he was reviled, he did not revile in return and left us an example to follow.

Now that is what is expected of us, that kind of earnestness of love, not just love that is enough, but love that is fervent.

On the third day of the pastors' conference last week, a fire gutted some buildings in Kubao.

We had a dinner with association pastors, and you were joking that the preachings were so on fire, and it transferred to some of the buildings.

But you can see what fire can do.

It gutted these structures, which fortunately were abandoned structures.

The fire of love, by the mystery of Christ's influence, does the opposite.

It does not consume.

It builds up.

But like fire, it is fervent.

You can feel the heat of love that is truly earnest.

That is what Peter is challenging his leaders to exercise, and that is what I am challenging you.

Watch where your selfishness tends to surface that excludes love of brethren.

If the other way we would be willing to love, if not for that uncomfortable requisite, do it earnestly.

We are willing to love just enough, and for some, just enough means I am willing to talk and have pleasant conversation with brethren after the service, and that's good, but that's not enough.

For others, that is for them, good enough to say that they are exercising Christian love.

They will demand more, demand more than pleasant conversation sometimes, as I will show next week, it may demand the opposite in order to show the sin of another.

But perhaps our selfishness surfaces when it involves your work or vocation, and it

is easy to justify.

I have a standard to keep in my work.

I just have no time for brethren.

This is one area where all of us, however, can manage to be fervent.

This is exactly the same word used in Acts 12 and verse 5 when Peter was imprisoned under the persecution of the Sanhedrin.

It was said in Acts 12 verse 5, earnest prayer was made for him by the church.

It's the same word, earnest.

So never yield to the excuse, there is nothing I can do, I am too occupied.

If you cannot pray for brethren, you are indeed too occupied in a sinful way, when there is no time to pray.

And that is something that we need to search whether selfishness is surfacing in our love.

When you are hardly in the assembly, do not tell me that you have fervent love for brethren.

Or when you are in the assembly, but hardly make it your business to know the brethren,

do not tell me that you have fervent love for brethren.

We can draw no better example than the Lord Jesus, whom Peter uses as the supreme example of suffering and yet loving.

He left us an example that we should follow his steps.

We will have all our bouts with selfishness, opposite to that is the plea above all, keep loving one another earnestly.

And there are so many ways to demonstrate that.

We are familiar with the songs of John Newton, the most familiar would be Amazing Grace.

Some sermons of John Newton are preserved and we can read of them, a few of them.

What many do not know is that what is left most of John Newton's ministry are his letters, personal letters.

And they have been collected, there are many of them.

He would write to different individuals, deal with them in wise counsel, sometimes rebuke them in a very affectionate way, sometimes teaching them.

And in those days, we're not talking here of John Newton on his laptop typing very vigorously many letters.

These are all hand-written and yet he produced so many.

That's love.

What are you doing to show that earnestness of love in order for us to really love earnestly?

Again, there is no better example than the Lord Jesus Christ and that is why we need to fill our hearts with that love of the Lord Jesus so that our love for the brethren is not the ordinary kind that you see in the world, but the kind of love that you would expect Jesus to extend to his people.

So our response is to plead in the words of this song, Jesus, thy boundless love to me, no thought can reach, no tongue declare, O knit my thankful heart to thee and reign without a rival there.

When the love of Christ reigns in our hearts, it will be seen and displayed in our earnest love one for another.

Let us say, Jesus, thy boundless love.

Our great God and gracious heavenly Father, may we never lose the wonder and awe that we should be the objects of your love and you have shown that love in the giving of your son.

And now your son has left us an example, we pray that our friends may realize that on the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ there is ransom, there is redemption that delivers from sin at the cost of the price of the blood of the son and yet for us, his followers, it gives us an example of what it is to love and may we heed the words of the apostle Peter that such love expected of brethren in the church is not in the marginal side of our exercise but Peter says above all, above all keep loving one another earnestly.

It reminds us how often fluctuating love is and that is because there are so many challenges among the brethren on this side of heaven when we still struggle with our own depravity and that makes it hard to exercise Christian love and for that reason we settle for less.

We call it love when it is just stability and politeness and courtesy and it is not that love that is expected of Christian love but it is a love that should be experienced

because it is a love that calls for earnestness.

Like fire it is something that must be felt in its warmth and we pray that such should be the love to pervade in this church but we confess that we often are falling short of earnestly loving one another, many times self-occupation takes over, our self-interest ranks first, forgive us for this and help us Lord to have that love Jesus exemplified and let that love be the love which is able to seek and decide the good of our brethren. So help us Lord to show love that we may be identified as indeed followers of the Lord Jesus for you have made this the identification of those who belong to you that they love one another.

So we pray that this may be a grace that will grow and that we will not be satisfied until we know that love is the ranking grace that defines our other Christian graces.

Now may the love of the Father, the grace of his son the Lord Jesus and the fellowship and bond of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore in Jesus' name we pray these things. Amen.