

The Greatest Thing In the World

BY

HENRY DRUMMOND

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Rewritten in current English by Chris J Jefferies, December 2010

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Preface to the translation

It's easy to find a copy of *The Greatest Thing* online, there are a number of sources. But all of these along with the various printed versions released over the decades are in Henry Drummond's fine Victorian English. Many people may prefer to read it in the original form, but for those that would rather read it in today's English I offer this version.

There are several challenges to rewriting something from the Victorian era. Although the language is English, it's English as used by the great, great grandparents of many of us alive today. *The Greatest Thing* was copyrighted in the 1890s though Drummond's spoken original is dated 1884. Some words used then have fallen into disuse and many new words have been added to the language. Other words are liable to confuse as the meaning has changed, sometimes subtly, sometimes considerably. Where possible I've chosen new words with the equivalent sense to the original. Sometimes it's been necessary to write a new phrase to replace a word where a suitable replacement isn't available. So I've replaced Drummond's word 'antiquity' with 'past ages' because it reads more naturally.

To keep the flow and persuasive argument of Drummond's prose I've sometimes had to redo sections in a completely new way, this is particularly true where he has chosen to illustrate an idea using cultural or technological examples from over 120 years ago. For instance I have introduced digital electronics to illustrate rapid technological change where Drummond used mechanical devices.

I have decided to replace his frequent and easy use of masculine words with forms that are gender-neutral. For example, 'man' has become 'person'. Sometimes I've pluralised to make this read more naturally, using 'people' and replacing 'he' with 'they' and his with 'their'.

I've also chosen to rewrite Moody's introduction in modern English. It would seem odd to keep the introduction while redoing the main text.

A more tricky aspect of this translation is that Henry Drummond was writing from the understanding (more widespread in his day than in our own) that the gifts of the Spirit had passed away. I have tried to follow his thoughts accurately while leaving the door open to a different interpretation than his. The reader must decide whether I've succeeded in this.

My overall approach has been to recast Drummond's meaning in today's English – so this is not a word by word, sentence by sentence translation. It is rather shorter than the original, not because I've set out to reduce it but because Victorian English tended to be more wordy than is acceptable today.

Quotes from the Bible are from the New International Version (NIV), Henry Drummond used the Authorised Version (King James). Where Drummond quotes from other sources I have retained them in the original form, for example the quote from Robert Browning. All quotes from printed material are in italics.

Chris Jefferies, 9th December 2010

Introduction

I was staying with a group of friends in a country house during my visit to England in 1884. On Sunday evening as we sat round the fire, they asked me to read and speak from the Bible. I was tired after the services of the day so I told them to ask Henry Drummond, who was one of the group. After some persuasion he took a small New Testament from his pocket, opened it at 1 Corinthians 13, and began to speak about Love.

I'd never heard anything so beautiful and decided to make every effort to get Henry Drummond to visit Northfield to deliver the same address. Since then I've asked the principals of my schools to read it to their students every year. The thing we need most in our Christian lives is love, more love for the Lord and more for one another. If only we could all move into that *Love* chapter and stay there.

D L Moody

Love - The Greatest Thing In The World

Every one has asked themselves the great question of past ages and of today: What is the greatest good? You have life ahead of you but you can only live it once. What is the noblest thing to have, the greatest gift to grasp?

We're used to being told that the greatest thing in the religious world is faith. That great word has been key for centuries in mainstream church and without a thought we've considered it to be the greatest thing in the world. Well, we're wrong! If we've been told that, we risk missing the truth. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul takes us to Christianity at its source and we read, "*The greatest of these is love.*" (verse 13)

It's not an oversight. Paul has only just mentioned faith. He writes, "*If I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*" (verse 2) Far from forgetting, he deliberately contrasts them, "*These three remain: faith, hope and love,*" and without a moment's hesitation he makes his choice, "*But the greatest of these is Love.*"

Nor is it prejudice. We tend to recommend our own strengths to others, but love wasn't Paul's strong point. We can see a beautiful tenderness growing and ripening throughout his character as Paul grows old; but the hand that wrote, "*The greatest of these is love,*" was originally blood stained.

Nor is this letter to the Corinthians unique in singling out love as the greatest good. Other New Testament authors agree. Peter writes, "*Above all, love each other deeply.*" (1 Peter 4:8). *Above all.* And John goes even further, "*God is love.*" (1 John 4:8).

Paul makes a deeply significant remark elsewhere, "*Love is the fulfilment of the law.*" (Romans 13:9-10). Have you ever wondered what he meant? In those days people worked their passage to heaven by keeping the ten commandments (and the hundred and ten other commandments which they had made from them). But Christ came and said, "*I will show you a simpler way. If you do one thing, you will do these hundred and ten things without ever thinking about them. If you love, you will unconsciously fulfil the entire law.*" (For example, Matthew 22:37-40).

It's easy to see why this is true. Take any of the commandments, for example, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" (Exodus 20:3). If a person loves God you won't need to remind them of that. Love fulfils that law. "*You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.*" (Exodus 20:7). Would anyone dream of misusing his name if they loved him? "*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.*" (Exodus 20:8). Wouldn't anyone be glad to have one day in seven to dedicate more fully to the one they love? Love fulfils all these laws regarding God.

In just the same way, if someone loves other people there would be no need to remind them to honour their parents, they could do nothing less! It would be preposterous to tell them not to kill. And suggesting they should not steal would be to insult them – how could they steal from people they love? What point would there be in persuading them not to bear false witness. That's the last thing they'd do to those they love. You'd never think to press such a person to avoid envying their neighbour's possessions. They'd prefer the neighbour to have them anyway! And that is how "*love is the fulfilment of the law*". It's the one rule for fulfilling all rules, the one new command for meeting all the old commandments, Christ's one secret of the Christian life.

Paul understood the secret clearly and in this wonderful chapter he's given us the best existing description of the Greatest Good. It can be divided into three parts. In verses 1-3 he contrasts love with other great things, in verses 4-7 he analyses its components, and in verses 8-13 he defends love as the greatest gift.

The contrast

Paul begins by comparing love with other things that were treasured in the Graeco-Roman world. I won't cover them in detail; their inferiority is clear.

He draws a contrast with eloquence. It's a wonderful gift – it can influence hearts and minds, rousing people to high purpose and holiness in action. Paul says, *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”* We all know why. We've all sensed the brassiness of words without emotion, the hollow and curiously unconvincing eloquence that lacks underlying love.

He also contrasts love with prophecy, mysteries, faith, and charitable giving. Why is Love greater than faith? Because the end is greater than the means. And why is it greater than charitable giving? Because the whole is greater than the part.

What is the use of having faith? It connects the soul with God. And what is the purpose of connecting with him? So that we may become like him. But God is love, so faith (the means) is so that we can love (the end). Love is clearly greater than faith. *“If I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”*

It's greater than giving, once again because the whole is greater than the part. Giving is only a small part of love, one of its many avenues. There's a great deal of loveless giving. It's easy enough to toss a coin to a beggar on the street, in fact it's often easier than not doing it. But love is often in the holding back. A few pennies buys relief from our feelings of sympathy. It's too cheap for us, and it's often too costly for the beggar. If we truly loved him we'd either do more, or we'd do less. *“If I give all I possess to the poor, but have not love, I gain nothing.”*

Then Paul contrasts it with sacrifice, even death. *“If I surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”* Missionaries can take nothing better to the unsaved than the mark and reflection of God's love on their own characters. That's a universal language! It takes years to learn a foreign language but from the day they arrive, a love that everyone understands will be pouring out unaware but eloquently.

It's not words that are the missionary, it's the person. A person's character is the real message. In deepest Africa near Lake Victoria I've met Negroes who remembered David Livingstone. Their faces light up as they talk about the first white person they ever saw, the kind doctor who passed that way years earlier. They didn't understand what he said, but they felt the love that was in his heart. They knew it was love even though he didn't say so.

Take that simple charm into the workplace where you plan to spend your life, and your life's work will succeed. You can't take anything more, but you need nothing less. Whatever your accomplishments and your readiness for sacrifice, if you surrender your body to the flames but are without love, it will benefit you and Christ's purpose – nothing!

The analysis

After contrasting it with all these things, Paul analyses love in three short but amazing verses.

He says it's a compound thing, rather like light which can be passed through a glass prism to produce from the other side the component colours, a beautiful spectrum of red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet – rainbow colours. In the same way Paul passes love through the prism of his inspired mind and out it comes in its many parts.

He reads out its spectrum for us, an analysis of love.

Just look at these components, notice that they have familiar names, they're good things we hear about every day, things that anyone can do. The greatest thing in the world is made of a number of small and ordinary parts. There are nine of them.

- Patience – love is not in a hurry
- Kindness – it cares
- Generosity – love doesn't envy
- Humility – love doesn't boast and isn't proud
- Courtesy – it's never rude
- Unselfishness – love is not self-seeking
- Good naturedness – it's not easily angered
- Forgiveness – it keeps no record of wrongs
- Sincerity – love doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth

Patience, kindness, generosity, humility, courtesy, unselfishness, good naturedness, forgiveness and sincerity, these make up the perfect gift, the measure of the perfect person.

Notice that all these things relate to other people, to life, to today and the near future, not to distant eternity. We hear a lot about loving God but Christ spoke a great deal about loving people. We attach great importance to peace with heaven, but Christ attached great importance to peace on earth. Faith is not a special addition to life in the world, it's inspiration for it, the breath of the eternal through the temporal. The greatest thing is much more than ordinary, it adds a high polish and beauty to the busy words and actions of everyday life.

Patience

Patience is the normal attitude of love – passive, waiting to begin, unhurried and calm, ready to work when needed but until then a spirit of peace and quietness. Love understands and is therefore willing to wait. *“Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”*

Kindness

Kindness is love in action. Have you ever noticed how much of Christ's life was spent doing good things, simply being kind? Think it over in that way and you'll notice that he invested a lot of time in merely making people happy.

There's only one thing in the world greater than happiness. That's holiness and it's not something we have control over. But what the Almighty *has* put in our power is the happiness of those around us. And in most cases it can be achieved just by being kind.

Someone said, *“The greatest thing a man can do for his Heavenly Father is to be kind to some of His other children.”* So why are we not kinder? It's greatly needed in the world. It's easy to do. It has immediate results. Kindness is always remembered and it returns huge dividends because love is an honourable debtor and never defaults on repayments! *“Love never fails.”*

Love is success, happiness, life itself. I agree with Browning, *“Love is energy of life.”*

*“For life, with all it yields of joy or 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 there's love, there the Almighty is too. Anyone that lives in love lives in the Most High. He is love. So love. Love without distinction, without planning, without waiting, love. Pour it out lavishly on the needy which is so easy to do, and especially on the rich who often need it most of all. But in particular pour it out on your equals – something that's quite difficult and perhaps rarely

done.

There's a big difference between trying to please and giving pleasure. Give pleasure! Don't miss a single opportunity because this is the infinite and secret triumph of a truly loving heart.

"I shall 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." (Stephen Grellet)

Generosity

"Love doesn't envy." This is love in competition. When you set out to do good you'll find others doing the same sort of thing, and probably doing it better than you. Don't envy them! Envy is a hurtful feeling towards the competition – covetous and critical. Doing good is no protection against bad feelings. Only a truly gracious, accepting heart can prevent such feelings rising up.

There's only one thing we should *really* envy, and that's the big, generous heart that doesn't envy!

Humility

We need to go even further than generosity, we need the humility to keep quiet and forget what we have done. After we've been kind and love has done its work we need to go back into the shade and say nothing. Love hides itself away and is never self satisfied. Humility is love in hiding. *"Love doesn't boast."*

Courtesy

At first this seems an unlikely component of the Greatest Thing. This is love in society, the polite behaviour of love. *"Love is not rude."* Politeness has been described as love in the little details. The secret of being polite is to love.

Love just *cannot* be rude. If they have loving hearts even the most uneducated people will behave well in every situation. Carlisle said of Robert Burns (the 'ploughman poet') that there was no truer gentleman in Europe. It was because he loved everything made by the Creator – the mouse, the daisy, every little thing. And with this simple passport he could visit courts and palaces from his little cottage on the banks of the River Ayr.

The very word 'gentleman' means what it says – a gentle man. Gentle people do things gently and with love and that is the secret. A gentle person simply doesn't know how to be harsh. Anyone who is *not* gentle can't help being inconsiderate and unsympathetic. *"Love is not rude."*

Unselfishness

"Love is not self seeking." Notice this, love doesn't even demand what is rightfully hers. British people often protect, even demand, their rights. But there are times when we need to exercise the right of giving up our rights.

Paul doesn't call us to give up our rights, love goes deeper than that. We are not to expect rights at all, love calls us to ignore them and to forget our own needs and wishes.

It's not so difficult to give up our rights, what is *more* difficult is to give up self altogether. Even harder is not to look for things at all. After we've found, bought, won or deserved something, we have already creamed off what we wanted. It's not much of a sacrifice to give up our rights after that. But not to look for them at all, to look out for others and not for ourselves – that's the difficult part.

"Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not." (Jeremiah 45:5) Why not? Because there *is* no greatness in things, mere things cannot be great. There's only one thing that is

truly great, unselfish love. Even self denial is worth nothing in and of itself, it would be a mistake to think like that. Only a higher purpose or greater love can justify the waste of self denial.

I wrote earlier that not looking for our rights at all is harder than giving them up. That's not quite correct, it's only true of a partly selfish heart. Where there is love nothing is too difficult or hard. Christ's yoke really is easy, it's just his way of approaching life. It's easier and happier than any other way. Christ teaches that there is no happiness in having or getting, but only in giving. Take note of that – there is no happiness in having or getting, but only in giving.

Half the world is on the wrong track in their search for happiness because they think it can be obtained by having and getting and being served by others. In reality, happiness comes from giving and serving. Jesus said, “*The greatest among you will be your servant.*” (Matthew 23:11) If you want to be happy remember that there's only one way - “*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” (Acts 20:35)

Good naturedness

“*Love is not easily angered*”. How amazing to find this in the list! We often think of bad temper as a minor weakness and rather harmless. Perhaps it runs in the family, it's just a personality trait, it's not something to be greatly concerned about in a person. But here it is right in the middle of this analysis of love. And the Bible condemns it repeatedly as one of the most destructive human character faults.

Strangely, bad temper is particularly a failing of people who are otherwise good. It's often the only stain on an otherwise good character. We all know men and women who are practically perfect apart from being easy to rub up the wrong way, quick tempered, or a bit touchy. It's such a shame.

There are two major kinds of sin, those of the body and those of the character. The Prodigal Son is clearly an example of the first, and the Older Brother illustrates the second. Most people will automatically feel that the Prodigal Son is the more serious offender of the two. But is that right? How can we measure one another's sins? Better and worse are just human words. Character faults may be less deliberate than bodily sin, but to the One who is love a sin against love itself may seem far, far worse. No vice, worldliness, love of money, or substance abuse does more to deny Christ and debase society than plain bad temper. It causes bitterness, breaks up communities, destroys marriages, devastates homes, shrivels hearts, and prevents the happy development of children. For causing sheer, unprovoked misery nothing can exceed bad temper.

Take the Older Brother. He was morally upright, hard working, patient, and faithful in his duties; give him credit for all of that. But look at him, sulking like a toddler outside his father's door. We read, “*The older brother became angry and refused to go in.*” (Luke 15:28) Just look at the way he affected the father, the servants, and the happiness of the guests. Consider the impact he had on the Prodigal Son. How many prodigals are kept out of the Kingdom by the unlovely character of people who claim to be already living there.

Analyse the thunder cloud gathering around the Older Brother, what is it made of? Jealousy, anger, pride, unkindness, cruelty, self-righteousness, touchiness, stubbornness, and sullenness. These are the basic ingredients, and in various mixes they're the ingredients of all bad temper.

So – isn't it true that character sins of this sort are worse than bodily sins? Aren't they worse for the sinner and also worse for others to live with? Surely Christ answered this very point when he said, “*The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of Heaven ahead of you.*” (Matthew 21:31)

There really is no room in Heaven for an attitude of this sort. Someone in that frame of mind would make Heaven miserable for everyone else. So unless such people are born again, entering the Kingdom is just impossible for them.

So you see why temper is important – not in what it is but in what it reveals. That's why I've written so plainly about it. It's a test for love and a symptom of love's absence. Basically, bad temper reveals an unloving heart. It's like a recurring fever caused by an underlying illness, or bubbles of gas caused by something rotten below the surface. It's a foretaste of what lies hidden in a person, breaking through in an unguarded moment. It's the suddenly revealed shape of many ugly sins.

A single flash of temper reveals a lack of patience and kindness, an absence of generosity, of courtesy and of unselfishness.

It's not enough to deal with the temper. We need to go right to the source. If we could change the inner nature all the anger would fade away. Hearts are sweetened, not by taking bitterness out but by pouring in love, a new spirit, the Spirit of Christ. His Spirit mingling with our own sweetens, purifies and utterly transforms. This is the only way to root out the problem, change the chemistry, renew, regenerate, and rehabilitate the heart.

Will power doesn't change people, nor does time. Jesus does. So - *“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 2:5)

Some of us have little time to lose, this is a matter of life or death! I write urgently for myself and for you too. *“It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied round his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.”* (Luke 17:2) In other words it's Jesus' clear verdict that it's better not to live than not to love. I'll repeat that – it's better not to live than not to love.

Forgiveness

“Love keeps no record of wrongs.” Forgiveness is the grace for suspicious people. If you have a forgiving heart you have the great secret of personal influence. Think for a moment. The people who influence you most are the people who believe in you. When we sense suspicion we shrivel but in a loving atmosphere we relax, are encouraged, and can grow.

Amazingly, even in this hard and unforgiving world there are still a few people who think no evil. This is the opposite of the world's way of thinking. *“Keeping no record of wrongs”* means we don't look for motives, we always look on the bright side and think the best of what people do. What a wonderful attitude to have! How stimulating and encouraging to be treated in this way, even for one day. To be trusted is to be in a place of safety.

When we try to influence or encourage others we soon realise that success depends on their assurance of our belief in them. When self respect has been lost, being respected by another is the first step to recovery. Hope springs from our approval.

Sincerity

“Love doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.” 'Sincerity' is the underlying sense of the Greek for 'rejoices with the truth'. It's very apt, those who love will love truth just as much as they love people. They will rejoice in the truth – not in what they've been told to believe, not in statements of faith, and not in 'isms', but in truth itself.

Such people only accept reality and will dig for the facts, searching out the truth without closed minds and valuing it at any price. The literal translation requires a sacrifice for truth's sake, there's no good English equivalent for the Greek but the meaning includes a refusal to take advantage of people's faults, care to avoid exposing weakness in others, wanting to see things as they truly are, and joy in discovering things are better than expected or reported.

That is love analysed. Our purpose in life must be for our characters to be shaped by these parts of love. That's the supreme work we're called to, to learn to love. And life is full of opportunities to do it! We all have a thousand chances every single day. The world is not a playground or a holiday, it's

more a classroom and an education. The eternal lesson for us all is, “How can we love more effectively?”

What makes someone a good cricketer? Practice. What makes a person a good artist, sculptor or musician? Practice. How do you learn a foreign language or good keyboard skills? Practice. And what makes a person a good person? Nothing else but practice!

Spiritual growth isn't arbitrary. We build character the same way we build strong bodies and effective minds. If we don't exercise we won't develop strong muscles, if we don't exercise our character it won't develop the muscles of strength, morality, or spiritual growth.

Love is not a matter of enthusiasm. It's a rich, sturdy, vigorous expression of rounded Christian character – a mature Christlike nature. And the constituents of such character are built by continual practice.

What was Jesus doing in the carpenter's workshop? Practising! Although he was perfect we read that he learned obedience and that he grew in wisdom and in favour with the Almighty. So don't resent what life has given you. Don't complain of its unending demands, its pettiness, the irritations you suffer, the small-minded people you must deal with. And above all, don't resent temptation, don't be at a loss when it grips you more and more despite your struggles, pain, and prayer. It's just your practice. It's the practice the Lord has set for you and it works to make you patient, humble, generous, unselfish, kind and polite.

Don't begrudge the potter as he so carefully shapes the not-yet-complete image of Christ within you. It is growing more beautiful even though you don't yet see it. Every brush with temptation can improve it. Remain fully involved in life, don't cut yourself off. Stay in the thick of it – people, things, troubles, problems, obstacles and all. Goethe wrote, “*Talent grows in aloneness, but character grows in the ebb and flow of life.*” The talent that grows in aloneness is the talent of prayer, faith, meditation, and seeing what has not been seen before. Character grows in life – that is mostly the place where we learn to love.

But how? The above list of love's components helps, but they're only the elements of love. Love is actually undefinable. Light is more than just the right mix of colours, we can form a range of hues but we can't create light that way. It's glowing and absolutely dazzling.

Love is also much more than just the right mix of personal characteristics. We can mix those aspects to make virtue but we can't manufacture love in that way. So how are we to obtain this transcendent essence of life in our hearts? We can strain our will to achieve it, we can try copying others who already have it. We can devise rules to follow, we can watch and pray. But none of that will produce love. Love is an effect and it's only produced by meeting the necessary conditions. Do you know what those are?

Take a look at 1 John 4:19, “*We love because he first loved us.*” Notice the words. “We love,” not, “We love him.” The “because” is especially significant, it speaks of the necessary conditions I mentioned above. His love is the cause, our love (for him and for one another) is the effect. We just can't help it! Because he loved us, we love – and we love *everybody*. Our hearts are gradually changed. Carefully consider Christ's love and you too will love. Reflect his character and you will become like him, growing in tenderness. It's the only way, you can't love to order. You must look at Jesus, fall in love with him, and grow to be a reflection of him.

Look at the perfection in his character and life. Look at his extraordinary sacrifice in life and on the cross and you just *have* to love him. And if you love him you can't help becoming like him. Love brings forth love. It's a process of induction, just like placing a piece of iron against a magnet. As long as you leave them in contact they are both magnets. Stay close beside Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us and you will become an attractive force just like him. Like him, you will draw people to you and you will be drawn to them. It's inevitable, it's the effect of love. Anyone who is affected by the cause will exhibit the result.

Let's get away from the idea that we develop faith by some sort of mysterious, accidental process. It's not chance. We develop it because there's a law of nature at work. Or perhaps we should say a supernatural law is at work.

Edward Irving once visited a dying child. When he went into the room he just put his hand on the boy's head and said, "My boy, God loves you." Then he left. The boy climbed out of bed and shouted out, "God loves me! God loves me!"

Those simple words changed him. The thought that God loved him was overwhelming, it melted him and began to develop a new heart within him. And that's how the Lord's love melts a person's ugly heart, makes them a new creature of patience, humility, gentleness and unselfishness. There's no other way to get it and there's certainly no mystery. We love others, everybody, even our enemies *because* he loved us first.

The defence

There are a few more things to add about Paul's reason for highlighting love as the ultimate possession. Remarkably he writes, "*Love never fails.*" And then he launches into a wonderful list of excellent things, exposing each one as temporary.

"*Where there are prophecies, they will cease.*" Every Jewish mother hoped her son might be a prophet, for generations there had been no prophets and a prophet was more honoured than the king. People were expecting a messenger and thought that when he came he would speak with the voice of the Lord. But Paul writes that prophecies will cease. The work of Old Testament prophecy is over apart from building our faith as we read.

Next, Paul considers tongues. Something else that was greatly sought after but has long since gone. Languages like ancient Greek and Latin are no longer used, and others are vanishing in our own day. That's not what Paul means, but it illustrates the principle. Nothing lasts forever. Even Victorian English is becoming more difficult to comprehend.

But Paul goes further, "Where there is knowledge, it will pass away." The wisdom of ancient times has gone. Today's school children know more than Isaac Newton ever did! Yesterday's news is of no further interest, out-of-date encyclopaedias are not worth much. This knowledge has passed away.

It's the same with technology. Horses were replaced by steam, then by the petrol engine. Look at the rate of development of digital electronics. The latest phones and cameras are obsolete almost as soon as they have been released! Any device older than a few years is regarded as worthless junk. Today's technology will go the same way as the steam engine.

Professor Simpson of Edinburgh University was asked by the librarian to select textbooks on his subject that were no longer needed. He simply recommended removing any book more than ten years old. Every branch of science is the same, old knowledge is of little value, it has passed away. Knowledge doesn't last.

Is there anything that *will* last? There are some things Paul declined to mention – money, fortune and fame for example. But he chose the greatest things of his day and easily swept them aside. He had nothing against these things *per se*, he merely noted that they wouldn't last. They were great but they were not supreme because there are things beyond them. What we are stretches past what we do or possess, many things that are sometimes seen as sins are merely temporary. It's a common New Testament approach.

John doesn't say the world is wrong, but he does say that it passes away (1 John 2:17). There's much delight and beauty in the world, much that is great and absorbing – but none of it will last. Everything in the world is for just a little while including all the things we want to see or do or take pride in. So don't love the world, nothing in it is worthy of an immortal soul. Nothing is worthy if it's not immortal, "*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is*

love.”

Some say that faith will pass into seeing and hope will pass into fruition, though Paul doesn't write that. We don't know much about our eternal future but we do know that love will last. God is love, and he is eternal. So desire the gift that lasts, the one thing that is certain to remain. It's the one currency that will continue when the world's banknotes and coins are no longer valid. You may give yourself to many things but make sure that love is first among them. Keep things in proportion and ensure the primary target is a Christ-based character, a character firmly built on love.

I said that love is eternal. Have you noticed how John constantly associates love and faith with eternal life? When I was a child nobody told me that “*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” (John 3:16) What they told me was that God so loved the world that if I trusted him I would have peace, or rest, or joy, or safety. I had to discover for myself that whoever trusts him (or loves him, because trust is the road that takes us to love) has everlasting life!

The good news offers us life! Never offer people a thimbleful of good news. Don't offer them just joy or peace or rest or safety; tell them instead how Christ came to give us a more abundant life, a life overflowing in love, loaded with salvation for them and heavy with redemption for the world. Only then can the full truth take hold of us – body, soul and spirit – transforming each part. The 'good news' as we often give it out today addresses only part of a person and offers peace but not life, faith but not love, justification but without regeneration. People slip back from this kind of religion because it never really gripped them in the first place. In its shallowness it offered nothing deeper or more joyful than the life they had before. Isn't it obvious that only a fuller love can compete with love of the world?

Abundant love is abundant life, to love forever is to live forever. So eternal life is thoroughly bound up with love. You want to live forever for the same reason you want to live tomorrow. Why is that? Is it because there's someone who loves you, someone you want to see tomorrow, to be with, to love in return? There's no reason to live unless we love and are loved. Suicide is the result of loneliness, the result of not being loved. When a person has loving friends they will live because to live is to love. Even the affection of a dog can keep someone alive.

Eternal life is to know God who is love (this is Jesus' own definition). Think about it. “*Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*” (John 17:3) Love *has* to be eternal because it's what God *is*! So in the end, love is life. Love never fails, so life never fails so long as there is love. And that's what Paul tells us too, the reason that love is the supreme good is because it will last, in it's most fundamental nature love is an eternal life. It's something we live right now, not something we receive when we die. In fact we're unlikely to have life after death unless we already have it now.

There's no worse fate than living and growing old alone, unloving and unloved. To be lost is to live unrenewed, loveless and unloved. To be saved is to love, a person who lives in love already lives in God, because God is love.

And now I've nearly finished. How many of you will join me in reading 1 Corinthians 13 once a week for the next three months? Doing that can change a person's entire life! Will you do it? It's for the greatest thing in the world. You could start by reading it every day, particularly the verses that describe perfection in character - “*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.*” Get these ingredients into your life and everything you do will be eternal. It's well worth finding the time for it. You can't become a saint in your sleep, it takes prayer, meditation, and time to get there. Careful preparation is necessary for improvement in anything, in body or in mind. Stop at nothing to have this awesome character replace your own.

Looking back over your life you'll see outstanding moments, those moments when you really lived and did things in a loving spirit. As you think back over your life, above and beyond all the fleeting pleasures there are times when you've done secret kindnesses to others. They're little things in

themselves but you feel they're part of your eternal life and they stand out from the busy background of everything that's passing away.

I've seen much of the beauty of creation and enjoyed pretty well every pleasure God intended for humanity, but looking back I see a handful of brief moments that stand out from the rest of my life – times when God's love has been reflected in some small loving thing I've done. These are moments when I've imitated his nature in some minor way and they seem to be the only parts of my life that will remain. Everything else in life is temporary, but those secret acts of love never fail.

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus explains judgement as the Son of Man on a throne separating the sheep from the goats. The test is concerned not with faith but with love. The test, the final test, is not religion but love. It's not what I have done or believed or achieved but the way I have treated people. The evil things I've done are not even mentioned. We're judged according to what we did *not* do. And that is how it must be because lack of love negates the Spirit of Christ; it proves that we never knew him and that his life is wasted on us. It means that our thoughts and lives were not touched by him, that we weren't near enough to him to be infected by his compassion for the world. It means, in the words of the hymn, that

*"I lived for myself, I thought for myself,
For myself, and none beside -
Just as if Jesus had never lived,
As if He had never died."*

Thankfully, today's believers are getting closer to the needs around them. Help that to continue! Praise him that people know better, just barely, who the Father is, who Christ is, and where he is. Who is Christ? Anyone who feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and visits the sick. And where is he? *"Whoever receives a little child in my name receives me."* And who belongs to him? *"Everyone that loves is born of God."*