

Abounding in Love

by T. Austin-Sparks



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"The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we also do toward you" (1 Thess. 3:12).

"We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, even as it is meet, for that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the love of each one of you all toward one another aboundeth" (2 Thess. 1:3).

"For this cause I also, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which is among you, and the love which ye show toward all the saints..." (Eph. 1:15).

"And whatsoever we ask we receive of him, because we keep his commandments and do the things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, even as he gave us commandment" (1 John 3:22-23).

"Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God" (1 John 4:7).

The Lord's Coming Related to Love in the Saints

There is something which lies behind these particular passages and which gives them their real force and value and emphasis. The matter before us has a prominent place in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, and those letters themselves occupy a place of great spiritual significance. They were the first of the recorded letters written by Paul, and in chronological order they ought to come right at the beginning of his epistles, before Romans and all the others; but, seeing that they are so largely occupied with the Lord's coming and all the matters connected therewith, it is as though the Holy Spirit said, 'Yes, they come first chronologically, but really they belong to the other end,' and so He caused them to be taken out of their chronological order and put last in the arrangement of the letters as we have them. All this about the Lord's coming is after this and this and this as represented by all the other letters. So the letters to the Thessalonians are really the culmination of everything in the coming of the Lord. In them we have the last things: and the Holy Spirit has put them in their right place - at the end and with a significance which we are going to indicate in a moment.

We pass over to the letters of John, and we find they also are occupied with last things. When John wrote, every other New Testament writer had gone to be with the Lord. His are the last writings and they are occupied with last things - the Lord's coming, the antichrist, and so on. He says "it is the last hour." Here is the same feature as in 'Thessalonians.'

But with the Lord's coming in view, what is to be *the* thing which characterises the Lord's people more than anything else? What is the culmination of the whole process and progress of spiritual things? What is the issue of 'Romans,' 'Corinthians,' 'Galatians,' 'Ephesians,' 'Philippians', and 'Colossians'? What is it all to amount to? You notice in both places where the last things and the last times are most in view - 'Thessalonians' and 'John' - the emphasis is upon love. That is the impressive thing here. What is the Lord coming to? What has drawn Him at any time? What is it that He delights to find and come to? *"Then they that feared the Lord spake one with another; and the Lord hearkened, and heard and a book of remembrance was written before him, for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, even mine own possession, in the day that I make" (Malachi 3:16-17).* There you seem to have something of an advent of the Lord, as though He saw something there and said, 'That is what I am looking for and there I can come.'

Heart Love, not Head Knowledge, Attracts the Lord

Now, I am not setting aside the personal advent of the Lord. His coming will have many aspects. It will be for judgment, it will be for many things; but as central to it all, must there not be a magnet - something that draws Him out? Will He come only to judge the nations, to judge iniquity, to judge the man of sin - will that be enough for Him? Will He not rather come because He has found a treasure, and everything else of judgment is bound up with that treasure?

A familiar illustration is found in the life of David. When he was being driven out from his rightful place by the usurper, for the time being an exile from his city and throne, he sent back the priests with the ark into the city, to be there as a focal point for his heart's affections while he was in exile (2 Sam. 15:25). We know well that the priestly aspect of things in the Scriptures is the love aspect, as the kingly is the administrative. Again, we find the love aspect coming in with Aaron. What is almost the first thing that is said about Aaron to Moses? - "when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart" (Ex. 4:14). It was a heart matter that brought in the priesthood. The principle obtains all the way through Scripture. It is the priest who in his love and devotion holds the Lord's people in a heart relationship with

the Lord; and when the Lord had to say the hardest things that He ever did say to His own people it was because the priests were then carrying on a system with no true heart relationship with Himself. Yes, the sacrifices and the services were there, but "this people draw nigh unto me, and with their mouth and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me" (Isa. 29:13). There was all the priestly service without the heart. The priest represents the heart side of things.

Now this matter of love is the most practical thing that ever we can have to do with. It raises more problems than anything else. But let us look at it firstly in the light of the Lord's coming. If the Lord is coming, what will He come to? I do not think He will come because there are people who have a lot of truth and a lot of exactness in their technique and all that sort of thing. Do not let us disregard the great value and importance of light and truth, of being right according to the Lord's laws and principles; but all that will never satisfy His heart. What He will come to will be that in which He finds His heart satisfaction because of love. Paul, in the first letter to the Thessalonians, prays that their love for one another and for all men may increase. In the second letter he does not pray any longer that it may be so, he gives thanks that it is so; their love to one another does abound exceedingly. And in that context he opens up the matter of the Lord's coming. I do not think we are straining our interpretation here. The Holy Spirit is so consistent in His thoughts. We can talk about the Lord's coming when we can say our love aboundeth, overfloweth, but I wonder whether we can talk about the Lord's coming with any real heart confidence unless that condition obtains.

Love Not Offended by Appearances

"Abound in love one toward another." Love for those of our own company may not be so difficult. But the Word adds "and toward all men." That goes deeper. I have of late felt more deeply and strongly than ever before the force of very familiar words - "Knowledge puffeth up, but love buildeth up" (1 Cor. 8:1), and other words such as "maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16). If we are going to be affected by that which is present in other people, all those features in Christians and in Christian work and activity which are repugnant to us, we are going to close up and withdraw in heart and nothing is going to be done in the way of mutual helpfulness and edification. Again and again the very practical question arises - because of this or that which we meet in another can anything be done, is anything possible? And very often, in the acute consciousness of so much that appears on the surface, we have revolted against it; and then, going to the Lord about it and facing it out with Him, we have been enabled to go on, and something has happened and the Lord has wrought, and we have been surprised, and rebuked for our original offendedness. We have to look through all that to the heart, and be reminded every time that the Lord looks on the heart. We are looking on all this which is largely the result of ignorance, lack of proper teaching and so on, and this can offend us. But the Lord looks on the heart; He sees if there is something deep down under all these preponderances, if there is a real heart love for Himself, and He knows if this is really the endeavour to express that love. There may be misapprehension, there may be ignorance, there may be other causes, but this which offends us is, on the part of those concerned, their way of showing their love for the Lord, and we must not be turned aside - we must get close to them and find what possibilities there are for the Lord. He is going on, He is not giving up; He is making all He possibly can of the least bit of heart love for Himself and for all men. The challenge of this is very practical and very searching for us. If we are affected by what we meet, by what we see and hear, by that whole world of sense - I am speaking in the realm of Christians now - we shall be put off, give up and decide that nothing is possible. "Love buildeth up"; you find there is something possible, there is some building up possible, more often than you would

really believe or imagine, if only you take the love line - not the reserved line of criticism and judgment, but the love line. If there is any possibility at all for the Lord, that is the only way to find it, and you have to do a good deal of digging down, and apply yourself to it with real purpose, to discover whether, after all, there is any genuine, pure heart devotion to the Lord behind all the rest and wrapped up in it. And that 'all' covers a great deal which I will not attempt to detail. If you find that true heart love, you have found your ground of possibility; and for us, dear friends, this is our business, a business to be diligently pursued. It is not a sentimental matter at all, but intensely real spiritual business.

Love Not Offended Because of Deficiencies

So much for the preponderances; there are also what we may call the deficiencies. We may say of others that we do not find in them knowledge or truth or teaching or understanding; we find, as we feel, nothing to work upon. We are tempted to say 'they do not know, they have not seen'; oh, the iniquity of a phrase like that when it is used as some people use it! 'Poor things,' they say, in effect; 'they have not seen this aspect of doctrine which we have seen'; and they pass them by because they have not seen! I say, that can be an iniquitous thing because it may be robbing the Lord of any possibility at all. It may be true that little or nothing is understood of that with which we are familiar; they may know nothing about this or that aspect of truth. But is there some heart relationship to the Lord, even with the very minimum of spiritual understanding and enlightenment and instruction? Because there is nothing of all that which we feel to be so necessary, are we going to abandon such children of God? This is a matter in which I feel we do need to be fully awake, and if necessary, to make adjustments.

Love Looks Upon the Heart

Love - not the presence of a lot of understanding and teaching and truth, and not the absence of all sorts of things - is the governing matter with the Lord. It is not that He Himself in His heart accepts the wrong things, but He sees through them, He sees differently from ourselves. There are two statements about David made in the Scriptures - made from two different standpoints. Speaking of David, the Lord said to Samuel, "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). That meant that the Lord's look upon David's heart was one which was favourable. But when David went to take bread to his brethren in the army his eldest brother looked at him and said, "Why art thou come down? ...I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thy heart..." (1 Sam. 17:28). Here we have God's look and man's look. We have to be very careful concerning the standpoint from which we are looking upon people before we judge them by the outward signs.

You can see there is no hope of building up unless there is love - and love for all men. You and I ought to be greatly concerned with this matter of building up. Oh, God only knows how much of spiritual increase and building is needed! It is a paralysing situation that faces us if we look at our own limitations. I am sure nothing is going to be done unless we have a very large heart to look over and in and through and beyond, refusing to be held by the thing that is glaring at us, striking us and hurting us, and reaching through to that which is true in the heart.

Love Builds

In the light of the Lord's coming, it is very important to be well instructed and to have all the light that the Lord can give us, but never let us think for one moment that light and

truth and teaching are inevitably the building factors, for there are many people with a vast amount of truth and love who are not very large spiritually; they are very small, shrunken and closed up. It is love that builds. Moreover, it makes differences in those who exercise it, it brings them into rest. Truth alone may bring a strained look into the face and eyes. Love ought to bring into the countenance some suggestion of quiet strength and restful confidence. Look again at those closing verses of Romans 8 - "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors." Look at the things in question - the ultimate things so far as our lives are concerned. No, none of these things can separate us from the love of God. Well, let us sit down in the armchair of His love and be at rest, and then get to work. You cannot work unless you have a background rest, and rest does not spring firstly from truth. It comes from love, God's love. Whatever else He gives us and adds to us, may the Lord make us a people who are characterised supremely by this love for one another and for all men.