

## THE BIBLE CLASS.

### PAUL'S ESTIMATE OF CHRISTIAN LOVE.

(For June 20th.—1 Cor. xiii.)\*

BY PHILIP A. NORDELL, D.D.

The establishment of Christianity in the world marked the beginning of the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. The first signal manifestation of the Spirit's power on the day of Pentecost was accompanied by a number of marvelous phenomena notably the gift of tongues. But as the Church expanded a number of other endowments, either natural facilities heightened or miraculous powers, manifested themselves among the members of the churches. Such were the gift of healing, of miracles, of prophecy, etc. But whatever their form, they all were bestowed by the same Spirit, and were proofs of His divine presence and power. They were in no instance given for display, or to serve private ends, but were designed as so many different forms of ministry by which the whole membership of the church might be strengthened and edified.

#### SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH.

A general participation in these spiritual gifts seems to have been a conspicuous feature of the church life in Corinth. But as almost every other privilege enjoyed by this church had been abused, it is not surprising to find that the exercise of these gifts which should have conducted to peace and joy became productive of disputes and rivalries. The reason was because the Corinthians sought these gifts, not as an unselfish means of benefitting others, but as a means of gratifying personal pride and ambition. Accordingly we find that among these spiritual gifts, that of "tongues" was inordinately coveted. Whatever this endowment may have been, it certainly was not an ability to speak foreign languages that had never been learned. Being apparently the most showy, though the least useful of these spiritual gifts, it was eagerly sought by those whose main desire was to glorify themselves in the public assemblies of the church. Against this vicious tendency Paul protested most earnestly. By means of the familiar parable of the body and its members he showed the absurdity of every member of the church trying to avoid doing his own work, and coveting the more conspicuous work done by some other. The vigor and perfection of the body is attained only in such measure as each member fulfils his own function; and for the welfare of the whole, as well as of each member, the work of one is as important as that of another. But the Apostle's chief criticism of the Corinthians was directed against that spirit of selfishness which underlay all their rivalries and contentions and, which was so opposed to the spirit of Christian love.

#### PAUL'S EULOGY OF LOVE.

In discussing the comparative value of spiritual gifts one with another Paul is drawn into a contemplation of their value as a whole compared with the fundamental principle of love. His spirit kindled at the thought, and giving free wing to his imagination he soared away in an inspired strain of praise. Every feature of this divine attribute is delineated with amazing beauty and sublimity. Justly has the Church in every age regarded this eulogy as one of the noblest chapters in its inspired literature. How much anguish and despair, how many pangs and martyrdoms, how many pitiless inhumanities perpetrated in the name of Him whose very nature is love, would have been spared to the world if the Church had always been as ready to heed the lessons in this chapter as to admire its unparalleled eloquence.

First of all the Apostle shows the worthlessness of all spiritual gifts unless they are accompanied by a spirit of love. He does not depreciate their value, but he shows that even when possessed and exercised to their utmost conceivable limits they lose all value unless penetrated by the unselfishness of love. The largest stretch of generosity in relieving suffering or want, even the sacrifice of life itself for the sake of a truth or a cause is worthless, so far as any distinctively Christian value is concerned, unless the charity is bestowed or the martyrdom endured in the spirit of Christian love. Undeniably the world has benefitted enormously by sacrifices that have not been inspired by this highest form of love. But Paul's argument rests on the basis that all human conduct must in the last analysis be estimated by its relation to Christ.

Then follows a wonderful personification of love as it reveals itself in its divine qualities in the relations that men sustain one to another. It sanctified suffering and trial by clothing them in the garments of patience. It softens behaviour, sweetens temper, and transfigures the whole person with a spiritual beauty.

Next, the Apostle pictures the permanency of love as compared with other gifts. These are transient. They are intended for use

in this world only. They are the scaffolding that serve a necessary purpose for a time, but will be taken down when the structure is completed. The one thing that abides from the discipline of earth, where everything is partial and imperfect, is that spirit of love which reflects in the soul the Spirit of God, and which goes with us into the world where everything is perfect and complete. This love is not only permanent, but it is supreme. Faith, the mysterious link that binds the soul to God; hope, the sweet anticipation of glories that lie beyond and that are the inheritance of the children of God, these, indeed, go with us into the eternal world. But the greatest of these is love, greatest in what it is, and greatest in what it does. For this the Apostle would have us strive. It is not the peculiar gift of a few. Its divine attributes may be shared by all, the humblest as well as the greatest.

## FOR THE SABBATH SCHOOL

### International S. S. Lesson.

LESSON XII.—PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY.—JUNE 20.

(Romans xiv. 10-21)

GOLDEN TEXT—"It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth."—Rom. xiv. 21.

TIME AND PLACE—A.D. 58. Corinth.

INTRODUCTION—Our second lesson from the writings of Paul is taken from his Epistle to the Romans, which was written from Corinth, where Paul was laboring in the gospel, and was sent to the brethren at Rome by the hands of Phoebe, a Christian woman. The chapter from which the lesson is taken treats chiefly of practical Christian duties, especially of Christian conduct towards those who are weaker.

VERSE BY VERSE—"Why dost thou judge."—The word "judge" here means to form harsh opinions of the conduct of others. "Set at naught."—As though he had no capacity or right to form opinions for himself.

V. 12. "Give account."—In the great judgment day. "Of himself."—And not for others.

V. 13. "A stumbling-block."—Over which one may fall. We are to do nothing which others may imitate and so fall into sin, and we are to put no hindrance in the way of their progress.

V. 14. "I . . . am persuaded."—Paul was a Jew, and had been raised to regard certain things as unclean, but had been led to see that these things were not essential. "Nothing unclean."—The reference in this whole passage is to the eating of certain food which Jewish Christians regard as unclean and as sinful to eat, while the Gentile Christians saw nothing wrong in it, such as meats offered in sacrifice and then sold in the markets. "It is unclean."—Because in eating it he acts contrary to his sense of right.

V. 15. "Be grieved."—Injured, hurt, or offended. "With thy meat."—The meaning is: If thou eatest meat that he regards as unclean, and he, feeling that this is wrong, is offended. "Now walkest thou not charitably."—That is, with proper charity and regard for his opinions. "Destroy not."—By tempting him to sin.

V. 16. "Your good."—What you regard as good. "Be evil spoken of."—Better not do what we have a right to do than to have it regarded as wrong-doing.

V. 17. "Not meat and drink."—These are not essential. "But righteousness, etc."—These are to be cultivated, and for their sake we may deny ourselves in meat and drink.

V. 19. "Make for peace."—That tend to brotherly unity in the church. "Edify."—Literally, to build up. We are to seek those things which build up others in the Christian life and character.

V. 21. "It is good."—It is right and proper to deny ourselves even that which seems to us right for the sake of others. "Nor to drink wine."—The question of meats is not a practical one in the Church to-day, but the question of wine is, and if any stumble or are offended by the Christian's use of wine, it is good that for the sake of such he abstain.

THOUGHTS—"After the apostles had described the duties of the Christians, especially of the Christians at Rome, in their various general fundamental relations: (1) As duties toward the church; (2) in all personal relations; (3) toward the state; and (4) toward the world, he proceeds to lay down the universal deportment of the Roman Church, by establishing the proper reciprocal conduct between the strong and the weak.

The future judgment will render just judgment upon all men. To this Paul would direct both classes before him. He would remind them, also, that God only is the rightful judge, and from Him only might men expect justice. But with this comfort he would remind them that each must render his account before God.

\*An Exposition of Lesson 25 in *The Bible Study Union Sunday School Lessons* on "The Three Great Apostles."