

Sermon 49: 1 Corinthians 13:7: Omnia Vincit Amor

OUTLINE

Bears all things
Believes all things
Hopes all things
Endures all things

INTRODUCTION

‘Omnia Vincit Amor’, this is Latin for ‘Love Conquers All.’ This is an expression from a poem by Virgil from 37 BC. These words have become a mantra for many. Songs have been written with this name, many men and women have tattoos with these words, there are renaissance paintings where Cupid who personifies love stands victorious over a lion giving expression to this belief, that love conquers all. This saying has resonated throughout the ages because we recognize the greatness of love, that so many great things have been done in the name of love, the many love songs we write about climbing mountains and crossing seas, echo this sentiment, that love conquers all. We feel it, when we fell in love with our spouses, there was nothing we would not do; when our children were born, that determination that gripped us to do all we could for them. These words give expression to a common human experience. But does it? How many marriages have ended? How many times has love not been enough? How many times have we knowingly failed the ones we love? Ironically, this saying, ‘Love Conquers All’ comes from a poem where the man Gallus who says it is busy dying of a broken heart after the love of his life Lycoris has run off with another man.¹ As sinful men and women we fail in love all the time. As Christians we are able to recognize the love we should aim at, and be realistic about the love we give. With this in mind listen then to Paul from 1 Corinthians 13:7, ‘Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.’ This sounds a lot like ‘Love Conquers All,’ is Paul guilty of the same sort of sentimental platitudes of modern pop culture? Obviously not, Paul is defining love, not in its populist expression but the love that results from a work of grace in the heart that is gospel shaped and gospel fueled. We all know that we fail at love and are looking for a way to love that does not fail. Paul is talking about love, as a fruit of the Spirit, a love like the love that saved us that we now give towards others. This is the love of a reformed and changed heart, a heart that has been broken in humbling itself before God, melted before the overwhelming gracious love that God has given to it, and now having tasted that love and been changed by it, is able by God’s ongoing enabling to give something of that love to others. Paul has been spelling out the many ways this love now lives. It is patient and longsuffering, and is still kind; it is not envious of another’s blessings but rejoices with those who rejoice; it does not gloat over those who hurt them when bad things happen to them, but mourn and serve; it is humble; it is selfless; it has a long fuse and short memory; it is a principled thing, and now Paul goes on to show us the resiliency of love, the tenaciousness of love, the undaunted and persevering nature of love in four statements. These will be our four points.

Bears all things

¹ <https://latinitium.com/omnia-vincit-amor-love-in-ancient-rome/>

'Love bears all things.' Each of the four terms that Paul uses to describe love remind us that the love described is given in the face of opposition, in the face of difficulty and the temptation to not be loving. Each description reminds us that love proves itself when tested. The word 'bear' has two possible meanings. In pre-NT Greek it would have carried the idea of 'covering' or 'overlooking' the idea of love covering a multitude of sins, or not looking at someone's bad to decide whether you will love them or not. This has a lot of agreement with other ideas that Paul has put forward. Many older commentaries take this direction. But as the Greek language developed the word came to have different connotations, the word 'bear' is a good translation of this idea. This word occurs 4 times in the NT. 1 Thess. 3:1 and 5 give the same idea, v5, 'For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.' More important to get at the sense of what Paul means by this word is 1 Cor. 9:12, the only other use of this word in this letter, 'If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure(bear) anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.' Paul illustrates what love bearing all things looks like in his own ministerial love for the Corinthians. You will remember that Paul was using his example of not claiming his rights to financial reimbursement from the Corinthians as an example of giving up one's rights in love to serve another. This was an example he was putting before them so that they would stop trying to leverage their rights to continue eating meat offered to idols while causing some to stumble.

So what do you think Paul means by love bears all things? Do you think he means that love simply does not get angry because someone left dirty washing on the bedroom floor? Or that love is willing to bite its tongue because you said you would be on time and you are 15 minutes late? Love certainly does put up with minor inconveniences without complaining, but Paul's example gives some real definition to what bearing looks like. Love is willing to lose what is legitimately theirs in order to serve. Love is willing to carry the heavy end of an obligation. This is the love that sees its brethren as precious and in the Spirit of Christ serve the church sacrificially. This is a love that bears with the scruples of the weak and does not insist on its own way even when it is in the right. This is a love that bears with the sins of those who have fallen and is not willing to stand over them in condemnation but will happily stoop to shoulder the load of consequences that it did not cause, and continue to stand in support until that weak sinner is able to stand firmly again. Jesus bore many things in order to satisfy His love for us, He loves us while we were His enemies and we were making it as hard as possible, yet He bore all to love us. This is the only way that love can truly conquer, if love is unconditional and gives even when it is not being reciprocated. Love can conquer in seemingly hopeless cases because it bears all. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well. Here was a seemingly hopeless situation. Think of all the road blocks Christ overcame to love this woman. He was a Jew and she threw that in His face; He was a man who ordinarily not speak to a woman in public without scandal; She was an immoral woman and to speak to her given her background would be scandalous; asking for water from a source that would not be trusted by other Jews; ignoring her jibes about who worships in the right place; continuing despite the fact that she tried to cover up her sins; offering the water of life even though she was combative and quarrelling about terms; talking about her sin in a way that did not shame her and drive her off; not reacting to her attempt to offend Him. Love, even though it is meeting resistance bears all because it is grace driven, it is not earned. Love conquers all not because it finds the perfect partner who has

no sins and everything always goes right, no, but because it loves like God does and loves unconditionally.

Believes all things

‘Believes all things.’ Next Paul tells us that gospel driven love is able to love the unlovable by believing all things. We must of course avoid the error that love is a gullible and credulous lump of feelings that has no principles that it is committed to and no brain that it uses critically. The ‘all things’ that love believes is not every possible theory and lie but the truth of God, His word and the gospel. It is important to note that Paul introduces faith and hope in this verse in the context of love. We will see in the later verses of this chapter that faith, hope and love are grounded in the gospel and biblical truth. And we see Paul bracketing faith and hope between bearing all things and enduring all things. In other words the context of these 4 descriptions has to do with love overcoming the odds. Paul’s use of the word ‘believe’ here should not be taken as ‘open minded positivity’ but rather a faith informed love that results in resilience. How does biblical faith, and a faith associated with the gospel inform love in order to make it bear and endure all things?

Some have suggested that Paul is talking about a disposition that is willing to believe the best about people and not the worst, an attitude that like God overlooks sin and sees potential. This has been likened to a sympathetic point of view that is willing to see someone as innocent until proven guilty and not vice versa. I would agree that these things are true and part of love believing all things, but it seems to me that Paul’s statement about love being fueled by faith is not a case of Paul merely describing an attitude of love, but rather alluding to a needed incentive that enables love to be able to plow through difficulty. Paul is opening up the motivations of gospel driven love to show what is needed in order for love to be so indifferent to opposition. The gospel uniquely enables an enduring love because it is informed by gospel faith and gospel hope. Paul is not waxing philosophical on love in general but how a gospel informed love is uniquely enabled to stubbornly endure.

Love is able to endure ministry to the most difficult and ungrateful unbeliever not because it knows that there is good in each one of us and keeps a positive attitude in seeing the best. No, a faith informed love looks at the person dead in sin and is confident that the gospel is the power of God to salvation to any who believe. That there is no one that the power of God cannot save. Love that has tasted the gospel and knows its own unworthiness will not be stilted when it comes across someone who has done terrible things, for it knows that where sin abounds grace abounds all the more. I do think that Paul is talking about how his own love is enabled to endure and bear all things, and this would be informed by his own personal experience of grace, 1 Tim. 1:15-16, ‘The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.’ He has learnt the lesson well that being unworthy yet saved, there is no one the Lord could not save. His faith is not misplaced in the goodness or ability of people but it is rightly placed in the power of God. Paul willingly endured hostility while preaching to his enemies because Jesus saves hostile enemies.

What does this mean for us? Is your marriage in a shambles? Are you married to a selfish, thoughtless, addicted, destructive person? Are you that person? What is going to inform your love that will enable you to go on? There are several things you could think that would help. You could think back to those times when they were loving you and trying hard knowing that you could have those times again. You could remember that there is some good in that person because they are not utterly depraved and as bad as they can be. But here is another perspective. You know that your spouse is a Christian, they are saved by grace, they are filled with the Spirit, they are no longer the old creature but a new creation with all the resources that God makes available to us to enable deep and lasting change. You can commit to your marriage confident that real though slow change is possible when two believers are committed to growing in Christ. Your gospel informed beliefs fuel your ability to go on in love. Is your child self-destructing? Your confidence that your child is not beyond hope enables you to continue praying; because you know that Jesus does not cast out any who come to Him, you are encouraged to ask for mercy for your child. You know that though you have not been able to change their minds, though they seem hell bent on doing what is obviously wrong, you know that God can open blind eyes, change stony hearts, and unstop closed ears. Because you know that God uses the truth, that He answers prayer you do not give up, you keep on speaking, you keep on praying, you keep on trying something new to see if perhaps the Lord will add His power to what you are doing and bring that child to its senses. Your faith fuels your love efforts. A missionary is able to endure the loss of health and comfort going to a foreign land knowing that by being there, by proclaiming the truth no matter how hostile or seemingly impossible the situation, God who works the impossible will use their frail and feeble attempts to raise the spiritually dead. Paul is talking about the Corinthian Christians putting up with the failings and weaknesses and annoying traits of their fellow church members, the same idea applies here too. You are putting up with someone who is moving towards change, who has God working in them just as He is in you, this should inform how we tolerate other believers.

Hopes all things

‘Hopes all things.’ Hope in Paul has to do with how our story ends. The hope that lies before us is the new creation. The Holy Spirit is given to us as a guarantee of this hope; Jesus resurrection of the dead secures this hope; the assurance that we as children of God have in our unfailing future changes the way we live our lives and the way we pursue love. In other words, having the hope that we have, we are uniquely armed to push through the pain because of the light we have at the end of the tunnel. Paul was a minister of the gospel whose life was full of ministerial afflictions, he describes these in 2 Cor. 4:8-12, ‘We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.’ This is a hard life that we would not choose for ourselves, and yet Paul is willing to live this cruciform life for others. Part of his motivation is his hope, 4:16-18, ‘So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to

the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.'

Paul is not some chipper optimist who has a sunny disposition and outlook on life who is able to breeze through all bad situations and love the loveless because he is oblivious to pain while living in a pie in the sky dreamland. No, he is a willing loveslave to all men because all the pain of this life adds up to no more than a light and momentary affliction, not worth comparing to the glories that are to come. How do we have a love that conquers all, how do we have love that makes us willing to suffer any loss in this life? You need a love that flows from the gospel hope that every believer has. Paul says as much to Romans in 5:3-5, 'Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.' We are able to turn our sufferings into joy because in God's hand they make us better people, and the final outcome of our life filled with sanctifying sufferings is not hell, but a certain hope. God's love for us, the Spirit of adoption whispering to our hearts that we are children of God, gives us a certainty about our future and this turns our present sufferings into something tolerable and beneficial. Our love with its eye fixed on the certain hope we have in Christ is equipped to endure any situation and continue to be loving counting it a light and momentary affliction that will be swallowed up in victory. In the light of what God has stored up for us, there is no sacrifice that is too much to make, we can never impoverish ourselves by loving sacrificially. If anything we can only make ourselves richer in rewards.

Endures all things

'Endures all things.' We have already shown that the bear all things and endures all things are very similar in meaning, and Paul is probably using overlapping terms to underline his point. But as we look at how this word is used in other places some very pertinent uses show up. Firstly, we have 2 Tim. 2:10, 'Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.' These are words written to Timothy at the end of his life while in prison awaiting a death sentence. Because love is pushing towards seeing another's best in God through Jesus Christ, it is willing to endure all to see another benefitted in this way. I guess the challenge for us is, do we believe this? Do we live with these thoughts at the forefront of our minds? Are the truths of the gospel so central that another's eternal good cannot come at too high a price for us? Another poignant use of this word is Heb. 12:1-2, 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.'

So in conclusion as we talk about love conquering all, as we talk about a love that is able to endure all things, believe all things, hope all things and endure all things. We will have to talk about it in two ways. As far as describing God's love for us there is no hyperbolic or poetic exaggeration needed, God has loved His enemies in such a patient and costly way that no human act of love could ever hope to match it or outdo it. But as far as our own love goes. We do want to

avoid the naïve triumphalism of simply saying love conquers all. We have all felt our own love fail, but here is the good news. The love that the world is desperate for, the love that knows to be good and right and desires to give to others but cannot, is now possible in the gospel. Not only do we have a model of perfect love in Christ, He changes our hearts to make them able to be more selfless. He gives us Himself to be within us molding us into the likeness of that love. Our love this side of eternity will not be perfect, but it can be more and more like His in a way that testifies to the truth of who He is and what He has done for us.