

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, April 9, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, J.D.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 13:7**

“Love is always eager to believe the best.”

### **MAJORING IN A MINOR VIRTUE**

As you know there are many types of sermons:

- There is the expository sermon which attempts to extract the meaning from a verse or passage from the Bible, and then apply its truth to help us meet the needs and challenges of daily life.
- Again, there is the life-situation sermon, where the preacher begins with a problem that faces an individual, and then attempts to throw light upon the problem from the Word of God.
- A third type of sermon is the topical sermon, where a current issue which affects a community, or the nation, or the world, is dealt with in the context of Holy Scripture.
- Furthermore, there is the devotional message which aims at the deepening of the spiritual life of the individual believer.
- Another type is the evangelistic sermon, in which the preacher, with all the passion at his disposal, invites his hearers to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Paul puts it so movingly in 2 Corinthians 5:20 when he says, “We beg you, as though Christ Himself were pleading with you, receive the love He offers you — be reconciled to God.”
- One other type that I would mention is the ethical sermon, which attempts to address some specific area of Christian behavior; and to ask - “How are you shaping up at putting your faith into practice?” In Ephesians 4:1, Paul says, “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love. Try always to be led along together by the Holy Spirit...”

Now I believe that every sermon should contain elements from several of these types -- a sermon can certainly be both topical and ethical, for example; or expository and devotional; or life-situational and evangelistic. And without question every sermon should end at the Cross, proclaiming the good news, and offering the Lord Jesus to those who do not know the wonder of His forgiving love.

Now, the sermon this morning is primarily ethical in its content, and here is the text in 1 Corinthians 13:7 — “Love is always eager to believe the best.”

Let me begin by telling you about a woman in one of our Midwest towns. She had once been a most exemplary wife and mother, and a devout member of her church. But for more than two years she absented herself from the church and its activities, and at the same time she acquired a very unsavory reputation.

She stayed home constantly, lounging about in pajamas or negligees, heavily scented with perfume, a glass of liquor always within reach, while she watched one television show after another. Almost every week, when her husband was away at work, a man would drive up in front of the house in his Cadillac, go in, and spend time with her. All her friends in the parish, including her minister who had listened to gossip, were appalled by this sad spectacle of a once fine woman so completely “going to the devil.”

As Shakespeare wrote,

“Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.”

Then quite suddenly the woman died, proving, as many people immediately concluded, that she had received the due reward of her wrongdoing. The minister went to call on the family to make the funeral arrangements; and it was during this visit that the woman’s husband explained the facts of the case. The minister had visited the family during that two-year period, but the husband confessed that he had covered up, because he could not bring himself to talk about the facts before his wife’s death. She had suffered from an excruciatingly painful and incurable disease for almost three years. She had used perfume lavishly to counteract the nauseating odors which accompanied her condition. She had worn the flimsy apparel to relieve the pressure on her abdomen. The liquor was bona fide medicine; the man who came to the house was a medical specialist from a nearby city; the TV watching was to take her mind off herself; the secrecy about the whole thing was to keep the home happy and free from foreboding as long as possible by making sure that the young children did not know that soon they would lose their dearly beloved mother.

Her minister, recalling the tragedy later, confessed with heavy heart and penitent spirit that it had taught him, as nothing else had ever done, to keep in mind St. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13:7 —

“Love is always eager to believe the best.”

A church that I know in New York State has a lot of congregational dinners and there used to be an elderly Irish Roman Catholic lady who lived across the street from the church. She had very little of this world’s goods, just her humble home and a very small widow’s pension. So, the church was a bit tolerant when she would come over to the church kitchen after each dinner to fill a pan with unused food -- rolls brought back from the tables, chicken wings, scraps from the carcass of a turkey, or broken pieces of cake which could not be served.

At the same time members of the church were also a bit critical. After all, why didn’t she go down to her own church for food? Why should Presbyterians have to feed her? Then the old lady died. And do you know what she had done? She had willed her little home, all that she had

in the world, to the church, out of gratitude for the food which, through the years, they had given her! How those resentful folk must have then wished they had remembered --

“Love is always eager to believe the best.”

Is there any one of us who has not been mortified on many occasions for neglecting Paul’s words? This text surely points to one of our most common human failings -- our fascination with gossip, our interest in scandal, our ear for bad news, our tendency to think the worst about people, especially those with whom we disagree; to impugn their motives, pick holes in their character, and try to make them out to be wrong, no matter what they do.

In Ireland’s famous city of Dublin there are two archbishops, an Episcopalian and a Roman Catholic. One day two old ladies were watching an elderly gentleman playing with a little dog on Stephen’s Green in Dublin. The old gentleman was throwing a ball to the dog who would catch it and return it to his master. Noticing his clerical attire, one of the ladies said, “I wonder who he is.” “Why,” said the other, “it’s the Archbishop of Dublin.”

“Och now,” said the other, “an’ isn’t it sweet to see him playin’ with the pup? He must be a kindly ould soul.”

“But,” said her friend, “ye know it’s not our Archbishop; it’s the other wan.”

“och,” was the answer, “an’ isn’t he a blitherin’ ould fool!”

(The man who told me that story years ago didn’t tell me which archbishop it was, and I must confess I have been consumed with curiosity ever since!)

“Love is always eager to believe the best.”

Notice, will you, that the word which gives power and significance to this text is the word “eager.” It is not enough for you as a Christian just to see the good in people. It is not enough just to say good things about people. It is not enough just to take a Pollyanna attitude toward life in general. Even more important than our seeing and believing the best in people is our eagerness to believe the best.

Now does this mean that we should be gullible, allowing ourselves to be cheated and exploited by every smooth operator who comes down the pike; fooled by every four-flusher we meet? Does it mean that we ought not to give an accurate evaluation of a former employee when we are asked? Is it right or decent to delude an employer by writing a letter of recommendation for someone and include in that letter misleading half-truths which make the person out to be more competent, or should we say, less incompetent, than he in fact is? Indeed, I have known an employer to write a glowing testimonial on behalf of an employee in the hope that this will help to unload him on someone else!

No. Eagerness to believe the best does not mean that we have to be credulous and shut our eyes to the obvious faults and shortcomings in a friend. There is a significant difference between

always believing the best about everybody and everything, and always being eager to believe the best. It is sometimes wrong to believe the best.

I remember a friend of mine, a judge in a juvenile court in Canada, telling me about young people up for trial before him. In almost every instance they came from homes where the parents exerted little or no discipline, and where the children got doing as they pleased, and were a law unto themselves. But the mother would come to court and testify; and according to her testimony, a more exemplary child than hers never walked this earth. He couldn't possibly be guilty of that with which he was charged.

Now there is a person who does wrong in "believing the best" about her son. She is simply closing her eyes to the facts and refusing to face up to the truth about her wayward offspring.

I repeat -- it is sometimes wrong to believe the best, but, it is always right to be eager to believe the best about people; that is -- to want them to be their best.

Eagerness to believe the best is not a matter of how good other people are; it is a matter of our attitude toward them. Eagerness to believe the best is not necessarily an estimate of how good a person is; rather it is an estimate of how good we want him to be, how good we believe he can be by the grace of God, and how good we will help him to be. Eagerness to believe the best is not refusal to believe the facts when someone goes off the deep end; it is, however, such sincere sorrow over another's fall that we do not delight in the report of it or find secret pleasure in spreading tales about it. Eagerness to believe the best does not save us from suspecting people when they behave as did the woman whom I spoke about at the beginning of the sermon; but it does save us from jumping to hasty and unwarranted conclusions; and it does save us from being less than a steadfast and true friend no matter what they do.

Sometimes a malignant accusation is made against a fellow Christian, and he says, "I feel helpless; the accusation is utterly untrue, but how can I prove that it is untrue?" And what is our response? Just this -- because we know our friend, we are eager, as the body of Christ, to believe the best about him or her; and so, we dismiss the accusation as being untrue.

Again, eagerness to believe the best is not blindness to the faults of another, but it is such a yearning deep in our hearts for the other person to be his finest self, that our attitude and encouragement may have a salutary and transforming effect upon him.

Believe me, our attitude in this regard toward people has a tremendous influence upon them. The late Warden Laws of Sing Sing penitentiary once said, "If you must deal with a crook, there is only one possible way of getting the better of him -- treat him as if he were an honorable gentleman! Take it for granted that he is on the level. He will be so flattered by such treatment that he may answer to it and be proud that someone trusts him."

Eagerness to believe the best about people is certainly one of the most creative forces in life; and indeed, the true greatness of any person can almost always be measured by his willingness to be kind. Who of us cannot say with the cowboy in Owen Winter's Virginian - "Twarn't preachin' and prayin' that made a better man of me, but one or two people who

believed in me more than I deserved, and I hated to disappoint them.”

J. J. Findlay, in his book Arnold of Rugby, tells many anecdotes about the illustrious headmaster of the famous English boys’ school. Among other things, his students used to say that it was “a shame to tell him a lie... because he always believes one.” Now we can be reasonably certain that Dr. Arnold usually knew when a student was lying to him. The point is that he was so anxious for his boys to be trustworthy that he could not bear to treat them as liars. And they in turn were ashamed to disappoint him.

Love encourages goodness and is always glad to hear about it. It was this characteristic among many others in our Lord Jesus Christ that gave Him such power in the lives of people who met Him. He saw right through a person at a glance. He detected, in a single, apparently meaningless gesture, the entire structure of that person’s life. The Gospels repeatedly mention that Jesus “looks at” or “sees” a man, and thereby penetrates all disguises, to whatever controls the person’s entire life.

No one could ever fool Jesus. He read the woman of Samaria like a book. But even though He saw the worst in her, He was eager to believe the best about her, and so He treated her with a dignity that challenged her to deserve His respect. He sees Matthew with a single glance, and tastes, as it were, the longing in his eyes. It was the same way when Jesus dealt with Zacchaeus, another tax collector. Jesus knew perfectly well how Zacchaeus had cheated and bled the hapless taxpayers of his district. Nevertheless, He was eager to believe the best about the little man. Do you remember Lloyd Douglas’ version of the story? Jesus invited Himself to Zacchaeus’ home for dinner. As they sat at the table something in Jesus’ eyes held Zacchaeus transfixed, until a miraculous change came over him. He excused himself from the table, went to the door, and spoke to the people gathered outside, telling them that he would restore fourfold any money which he had taken illegally, and moreover would give one-half of all his possessions to feed the poor.

The eyes of Jesus alone saw the magnificent potentiality in even a distraught girl like Mary Magdalene. Every human heart hungers for such treatment. Children bloom in the sunshine of the spirit that encourages and helps them whenever they try to do well.

Dr. Adam Clarke, the renowned Methodist theologian of the early nineteenth century, was very slow to learn as a boy. One day a distinguished visitor paid a visit to the school, and the teacher, if you could call her such, singled out Adam Clarke and said, “That is the stupidest boy in the school.” Before he left the school, the visitor came and stood beside Adam and said kindly, “Never mind, my boy, you might be a great scholar some day. Don’t be discouraged, but try hard, and keep on trying.” Adam never forgot what that kind and sensitive man said to him that day; and who knows, it may well have been that word of hope, that eagerness to believe the best, that made Dr. Adam Clarke what he one day became.

What do people see when they look into our eyes? Do they see our condemnation of what they are, our cold, hard disdain, our eagerness to believe the worst about them? Or, because Christ lives within us, and because His love has humbled and mellowed us, do they see our eagerness to believe the best about them; and seeing that, take fresh courage, and in the loving

mercy of God, be led to find in our Master, their Master too?

**AMEN.**