

The Guiding Principle of the Christian Life

Good afternoon everybody. Thank you very much for inviting me here this afternoon to address this conference. It is very encouraging to see so many of you here. I've also been very encouraged and humbled really by the way our friend Mr Buss spoke this morning

You will see as we go through my address there are a number of points he made this morning that have a real resonance with what I want to say this afternoon and it's a reminder that although he and I had exchanged emails wishing one another the Lord's help and blessing, we'd not in any way discussed our respective addresses. But I hope you will see that there is a real connection between them.

As some of you know, because you attend them, we hold monthly meetings for young people at home, at Oakington, and I have quite often asked those that come to suggest a topic for future meetings and I think you've got a sheet there to do the same here. Well, very often that doesn't happen and one is left wondering what topic to take, and what would be suitable, what's interesting and what's relevant for you as young people. Now on this occasion, of course, the topic has been given to me, and I have found that quite an exercise as well, to speak on a topic that has been given to you and to wonder what really is your expectation. I hope there has been an expectation. I hope you have given it some thought in advance. But in some ways I would like to begin (I am not going to do this, so don't worry!), but I would like to begin by asking you to suggest what is the guiding principle of the Christian life? I wonder what various suggestions you would make. That's not because I would want to assess whether you have got it right or wrong: I think there is a number of things that could be said and it is not about right or wrong answers but, if there is a desire to live a truly Christian life, then there will be that thought, what is involved in it? What should we be guided by, how should we be guided? What is a Christian life?

When I first considered this subject, there were a number of different aspects and different angles to it, if you like, that came to mind, but one word especially seemed to come to mind that I think sums up all of those things, and that word is love. Love. I believe if we have love as our guiding principle, in all that we do, say and think, we shall be walking in a truly Christian pathway. And of course, in saying that I recognise it's not within our own gift to put ourselves always in the right spirit, we don't always handle things in love as we ought to do. But it is something to pray for, something to strive for, something to commit to God.

Now the first heading that I have given to this within this address is, "Love is the fulfilment of the law", because one early thought I had was that someone would say, the Christian's guiding principle in life ought to be to obey the law of God, and I think there is definitely some validity in that position. However, if we look at the law of God, and I just want to look very briefly at the Ten Commandments, if we look at that, surely keeping those commandments of God, can only be rightly done in love.

The First commandment is this, isn't it, thou shalt have no other gods before me. Now that shows us the dedication and the singleness of true love, doesn't it? We're not to have a divided heart. God will not share our spiritual love with any other. The Second commandment is similar in a way, Thou shalt not make any graven image, nor bow down to it or worship it – there is only one right worship and that is of God. God is the only one worthy of worship. Again it shows, doesn't it, a single focus if you like, a single object for our love. The Third commandment is, Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. As Mr Buss said, so often, I suppose the majority of the times, we

hear the name of God spoken it is in vain. How sinful that is. Now if you think of a natural love even, it is clear that one does not like to hear a loved one ill spoken of. If you have someone that you love you want them to be taken seriously, you don't want people to mock them, you don't want people to disrespect them. Of course, how much more, (I have used these aspects of natural love), but how much more in love to God, the holy God. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Well again, where real love exists there needs to be time dedicated to the object of that love, doesn't there. Two people in love need to spend time together, they need to have time when there are no distractions, and time to be used so that the love matures and deepens and we get to know that person so much more. Remember that the Sabbath day as it was originally given, the Lord's Day as we refer to it now, it is given to man for his benefit, for his blessing - do we use that rightly? Now I won't go through all of the remaining commandments one by one, but if you think about them, to Honour our parents, surely our parents are the first people that we love in life. And to avoid theft, killing, adultery, false witness, covetousness (or jealousy) is to respect and to show a measure of love toward our fellow human beings.

Now this is how I understand the passage (you may wish to turn to it) in Matthew 22 v 35 – 40, 'Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets'.

I was having a conversation recently with someone who was trying to set forth that in saying things like this, (he didn't use this particular example), but Jesus was introducing what he called a "higher law". And I said, Well, I don't think it's a higher law, because that would suggest that the original law of God is not perfect. But what Jesus is doing is showing how these things are to be kept. It's not a replacement for those commandments, it's an exemplification of those commandments, it is in love. Now Jesus of course was not successfully to be tempted into setting aside any of the original Ten Commandments. The Jews would quickly then have accused him, wouldn't they, of not upholding the law. But he demonstrates that those commandments are fulfilled only through love to God, and love to our fellow men.

Now the second point that I thought of is that someone may say, that the guiding principle for the Christian is to avoid sin. And again, I think that is valid. Being just and pure and holy, God cannot tolerate sin. I think that so often it's sad but true in our lives, we don't really have an understanding of just how awful sin is, what an offence it is, we don't really have much comprehension of perfect holiness. But as God is perfectly holy, what an offence sin is!

Now in Ephesians 4, you have many exhortations of how we should live a Christian life, and if you are really interested in further instruction and teaching about this principle of the Christian life, I commend that chapter especially to you. In verse 30 we read, 'and grieve not the Holy Spirit of God'. Now where love is, we shall not want to offend each other's feelings, I know it does happen but that should not be our desire. If we know that there is something that especially upsets our loved one in our behaviour or our speech or in other ways, we try to amend that don't we, we try not to say those things and try not to do those things. If you say that you love someone, and yet you continue to constantly do things that you know upsets them, that would be very strange sort of behaviour wouldn't it? How much more so, in the Christian's relationship to God, though we do come very far short of what we ought to be in that regard. Now of course Mr Buss touched on this, this morning, the part of that prayer, 'lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil'. And I do think that if that prayer is rightly prayed in our hearts then that really is born out of love. You may

think this is a bit of a strange thing to say, but I don't think that we should pray that prayer simply in this way, and I paraphrase, but "keep us from the things that might have negative consequences for us". It's easy I think to sometimes pray like that but we shouldn't. We should pray that prayer in the spirit of Jabez. You read of Jabez in 1 Chronicles 4 verse 10, and part of his prayer is this, 'That thou wouldest keep me from evil that it may not grieve me'. Sin grieves the Lord's people, not just because of the fear of punishment but because it offends the God whom they love. Again, I say, we should think of the awfulness of sin, it is such an offence to God. Now if we have a love to God, we should for ever be striving against that. Now the converse of course is equally true: where there is love we shall want to do the things that are pleasing to our loved one. Proverbs 16 verse 7 tells us, 'When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him'. And Proverbs 11 verse 20 says 'such as are upright in their way, are his delight'. Do we have that desire in our lives to delight the Lord by being upright, by avoiding sin?

Now the third point I would come to is this, that love promotes self-sacrifice and a willingness to serve. Perhaps one of the principle evidences that the world sees in a truly Christian life, is that it is one that is devoted to service, primarily of course to serve God, but also to serve others, as God directs us and provides us with the opportunity to do so. And again you might like to look up this passage in Matthew 25 v 31-46 – there is a great separation that is made in this passage, Jesus is speaking of the sheep and the goats, of course meaning the righteous and the unrighteous. Now Jesus says there, 'I was an hungered and ye gave me meat, I was thirsty and ye gave me drink, I was a stranger and ye took me in, naked and ye clothed me, I was sick and ye visited me, I was in prison and ye came unto me'. Now the righteous do not see at first how that was so. They say, "Well, when did we see you in that condition?" But it is very clear in Jesus' words, that those things that were performed for others in need, "ye have done it unto me". It's a very wonderful aspect of Christian service, "ye have done it unto me". But of course very solemnly the opposite is true, if we withheld that from others who are in need, we have not done it unto Christ, we have failed Him. The words that I quite often think of, were spoken by Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, he prophesied very wonderfully, you can read of this in Luke 1 v 74-75, and in that prophecy or in that prayer really if you like, he comes to the Lord with this desire, 'that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life'. What a standard of service that is - serving God without fear in holiness and righteousness, all the days of our life. Now it takes very great faith, and at times very great courage, to serve the Lord without fear. But John tells us in his first epistle, 'Perfect love casteth out fear'. Again you see, we can see there that love is the motivation, love is a source of strength. Indeed I think it is fair to say, that love is the strongest emotion of all. People will go a long way out of hatred or jealousy, but people will do things for love's sake, that they would not do for any other reason.

Now I find personally, and some of you will have heard me say it, but I find personally that to be a great challenge that we read of in Psalm 40 v 8. I know that that is spoken partly there in prophecy concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, and of course in Him it is perfectly fulfilled, but it is also a word for us, 'I delight to do thy will, O my God, yea thy law is within my heart'. How often is that really true of each of us here? How often do you, do I, delight to do the will of God? Now, Jesus says, 'If ye love me keep my commandments'. Again, there is a link there, in the way we avoid sin, in the way we obey the commandments, it is in love. 'If ye love me, keep my commandments'. When I was received into the church at Oakington, almost 30 years ago, Mr Tyler received me into the church and was led to give me this word from Hebrews 13, 'Now the God of peace, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ'. Now as I say, we feel to come short, and we do come very far short of that, but I trust the desire is there, the love is there, the willingness to serve is there.

Now, self-sacrifice. Now by very definition it would mean giving up something that is of value to us personally, in order to serve the interests of somebody else. Now that could be needing to curtail our career ambitions for example. Many years ago now my father went before a promotion board and he was successful in so far that he was offered a higher level job, if he would relocate to London. But he said he could not do that because the Lord had appointed him a place in Oakington to serve God there, and he was not willing to move. He said afterwards, that although that board had heard many reasons as to why people did not want to relocate to London, they had certainly never heard that one before. I'm not saying that it's wrong to move to further a career, don't misunderstand me, for some that is right. But I use that as an example that sometimes, in some circumstances, we have to forego, what would be in our individual interest to do. Now it may be something more simple, perhaps our time. I'm sure you're all very busy, we often seem not to have much time to pursue our own interests or hobbies. Sometimes the time that we do have needs to be set aside, shopping for a neighbour or a friend, or giving someone a lift somewhere. Opportunities to serve. Remember, "I delight to do Thy will", to do it in the right spirit. One way of looking at the guiding principle is, we should be following our Lord's example. What an example it was in this context, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends'. Now just a little aside: we need to be very careful when we quote the scriptures to consider the context. Perhaps we often hear that particular sentence I have just quoted, 'Greater love has no man than this, than a man lay down his life for his friends'. But do notice the verse that follows that one, 'Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you'. Would we be a friend of Jesus? Well, then, do whatsoever He commands. "Whatsoever", I have often said that is an enormous word. I know it is quite a long word in the sense that it has got quite a few letters, but what I mean is, it encompasses everything. Whatsoever. Our friend this morning, spoke about doing the will of God as it is in heaven, not questioning it, not challenging it, not saying, "Well I'd rather do this". 'Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you'. Surely that can only really be for the Christian a loving response to what the Lord has done for us. If He didn't withhold his life for our sake, what can we withhold, as it were, from serving Him?

Now having I trust established from the scriptures, what is to be the guiding principle, I'd like to turn now more directly to - what is the Christian life? What does that mean to you and what does that mean to me?

I have headed up this part of the address as, "True discipleship". Now a true Christian is one that seeks to follow or imitate the Lord Jesus Christ. This is strongly implied by adopting the name of Christ in the word Christian, it really means, Christ-like doesn't it, to follow him. Just a little thought here, not wishing in any way to be controversial but it does seem to be wrong to use or adopt any other name to describe ourselves. I personally don't like to be called a Calvinist. I don't have any problem with those doctrines that are implied by that, but we are not a follower of John Calvin. I don't like Gadsbyite or Huntingdonian, as you sometimes hear. Where those men were correct in what they taught, then they were following Christ and to Him alone should be the glory. And where they were wrong, and of course they were all only men, then why would we give ourselves their name? I think Christian is the only thing that we should be called.

Now perhaps when we think of discipleship, we think first of all of those who literally followed the Lord in his time on earth as he journeyed around Palestine. But really to be a disciple means to be a pupil and of course the word pupil implies there is a master or a teacher. I want you to hold onto that thought as I want to come back to that in a moment. But it can mean to be adherent to another person, a follower of their teaching and their mode of life. Now in various natural situations you have philosophers or gurus. The word guru really means teacher or likened to a master or

counsellor, and they have their school of followers, people follow what they teach, they follow their lifestyle and so on. You read of famous artists who have a school, there are those who imitate the way they have painted, and you say they are a disciple of van Gogh or whoever it may be. All of those are forms of discipleship, but of course, none of those lead to Christ. Now in the Bible the word disciple clearly extends well beyond the twelve apostles that perhaps we think of first of all, and encompasses all who truly followed the Lord. Now the question for everyone here, who has a real interest in the guiding principle for the Christian life should be, am I a real disciple of Christ? Do I exhibit the traits of a real Christian? It's a wonderful thing to have that name rightly applied to us. It is an amazing privilege to be rightly called a Christian. Now one hallmark of a disciple is this, their desire to learn, to be a pupil in the school of Christ. Jesus said, 'Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of heaven'. If you look at a healthy little child, one of the things that is very apparent is their thirst for knowledge. Those of you who have had children, or others who have dealt with children, maybe younger brothers and sisters, they are always asking questions aren't they, why do you do that? why does something else happen? what would happen if I did this? There is a desire to learn and to know more things. Now a disciple should have that thirst for knowledge. Jesus said, 'Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness'. One cannot get far as a disciple without that willingness to learn. And I think what comes with that also is the acknowledgement of our ignorance, and our admission that we need to learn more

I didn't realise until earlier this week that there would be another reading of the Scripture before my address, but it was very helpful to have read Romans chapter 12, because this gives a pattern for our instruction. I think it would be helpful if you opened your Bible at that place and just follow through again in Romans Chapter 12. I'm not going to read it but I want to refer to various sections of that chapter, within this heading of discipleship. The first point, the desire to serve – verse 1, speaks of your reasonable service. I have already mentioned Psalm 40, I delight to do thy will, O God, thy law is in my heart. We've seen that the pathway of a disciple involves sacrifice. Persecutions, separation from worldly, that is, sinful, pursuits and interests. In verse 2 we are commended to submission and obedience. To be conformed, is really to be subservient to something. In Romans 6 v 16, this is made clear to us, 'Know ye not that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey. Whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness'. I again think often of that first miracle that Jesus made at Cana of Galilee, and the words that Mary said on that occasion. 'His mother sayeth unto the servants (those who were serving), whatsoever he sayeth unto you, do it'. It is a very powerful word, isn't it? I commend it to you. 'Whatsoever he sayeth unto you, do it'. It's fundamental to the concept of a pupil and a master relationship, isn't it? Now, so often we prefer to be in charge, we want to do our own will. May God in His mercy deliver us from such a spirit. Now that verse uses that word 'prove', to prove something in this context is to walk it out in practice. Now that's not an easy matter is it? But the Bible nowhere promises the Christian an easy life. I often hear people say, and there's nothing wrong with it so far as it goes, they are seeking to know the Lord's will in some particular matter. I have to say, far less frequently do I hear people asking for the grace to do it. I can think of many occasions in my own life, and perhaps you can think of times in yours, where we have actually known what the will of God is but we haven't done it, it didn't suit us and wasn't the right time so far as we were concerned. How we need the grace to do the will of God. Now, remember that question, it is another very challenging question that Jesus asks, you can read of it in Luke 6 verse 46 – 'Jesus said, Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say?' There is no valid answer to that is there? Only it's because of our unbelief, it's because of the hardness of our hearts. This is so closely linked to true discipleship. It is doing the things that He says. Verse 2 also speaks about the willingness to be different. In 2

Corinthians we read this, 'Wherefore come out from among them and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing'. To be a true disciple of Jesus Christ is not in our nature, it is not inherent in the human spirit, therefore there must be a transformation. The transformation that is needed in our life to really be different, different from what we have been, different from the sinful world around us. Verse 3 particularly really speaks of humility. How important that is in discipleship. Peter in his 1st epistle says this, 'Likewise ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea all of you be subject one to another and be clothed with humility, For God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble'. We can see in the gospel records, that even some of the apostles were guilty of wanting to be the greatest, weren't they. It is very sad to read that, how it caused strife and division amongst them. Pride is one of those besetting sins, I think pride is in everybody, it is more apparent in some than in others, but it is a besetting sin of everyone. We need to be made to be humble. One of our friends at our church at home, has quite often said to me about a sermon he heard in Portugal when he was on holiday there once, about humility. The minister there said, 'We cannot give ourselves humility otherwise we would be proud of it'. And I think that's so true. God must give that real humility of spirit.

Verses 4 – 8 of Romans 12, really speak, I have given it this heading, it is really about "Teamwork and supporting the church". Elsewhere Paul writes to the Corinthians, 'As the body is one and hath many members and all the members of that one body being many are one body, so also is Christ'. This has the application to the local church where we may be members of the church or members of the congregation. It also has an application to the one universal church of God, in every land and nation. We should support both by prayer for the Lord's people, wherever they are found. Many suffer in natural things far greater deprivations and persecutions than we do, and we should uphold them in our prayers and practically also, where we have the opportunity to show that love one to another. Now due recognition must be given as it is set out in this chapter, to the different gifts that we all have. I wonder this, and I leave it for your thought, do we examine ourselves as to what is the gift that God has given to us? I mean personally, individually. What gifts do you each have? How can those gifts be used in serving God? Now we must clearly not be boastful or conceited, but equally we are not to hide God's gifts. Not everyone can take the lead, of course, and again we need to see humility and submission in that.

Verses 9 – 10 really speak again of love, don't they? In the following chapter, Romans 13 verse 10, in a way it is summed up like this, 'Love worketh no ill to his neighbour, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law'. And this ties in of course with our earlier thoughts on obeying the Ten Commandments. How often peace and harmony are destroyed, by a lack of love, between each other and more solemnly even between churches. As we have already spoken about love I won't pursue that again here, but it is critical and vital to our understanding of this passage.

Verses 11 – 17, I have called this, "Grace and thoughtfulness". What I mean here is having a correct spirit in our dealings with other people. Again to compare scripture with scripture, in Colossians 3 verse 16 we read, 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another'. We need to remember that there are times to speak but there are also times to keep silent. We need the wisdom of God to know which is which. It is very easy to make an excuse of either to suit our own wishes. To be guided by God when to speak, and when to keep silent. The word that is the basis of my daily prayer as I go off to work in the morning is this, from Proverbs 16 verse 20, 'He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good'. Perhaps like me in your work, it may be in your studies or whatever you are involved with, there are lots of decisions to be made, and lots of things that could be done in various different ways. How we need to handle them wisely. It is a wonderful encouragement, and has been to me over many years, that we read in James's epistle, 'If

any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God'. Not only that, but he says which 'giveth liberally to all men'. We have to ask it in faith, but God does give wisdom. Now when we have something to deal with, are we in the right spirit in the way that we are doing it? Are we approaching it in the right way? In the first place, is it a matter that needs to be tackled? Is the Bible clear on what is right and wrong, or is it a matter of conscience? Again if you are interested in guidance of the Christian life, study Romans chapter 14, there is so much in that. Perhaps you might like to turn to that chapter, just for a moment. I won't read it but we find there how we must not seek to impose our own views or preferences on someone else where the scripture is not prescriptive. This is not to encourage things that are obviously wrong or to make an excuse to do something that's wrong, but if the scripture is not prescriptive on that, we need to consider how to deal with it. I have often found people are very quick to condemn things that they are not personally interested in. It is very easy to say such a thing is wrong and therefore nobody should do it, simply because I personally am not interested in doing it. We need to be careful not to impose our personal views upon others. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul sets out how some may say something is permissible while others do not. And Paul says that there is room for accommodation on both points of view, neither should be imposed on another, but in verse 5 it says, 'Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind'. Now of course, that needs to be handled carefully and prayerfully. We need that persuasion to come from the Holy Spirit of God. Verse 22 is a warning, 'Happy is he that condemneth not himself in the thing which he alloweth'. Paul is very clear that we should avoid giving offence and we should operate through love to the brethren. Verse 19, 'Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and the things where one may edify another' – edify really means to build up but also to strengthen and encourage one another. Further instruction of course is to be found in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 concerning eating meat that had previously been offered to idols. Similar thoughts and again worth studying.

But just to return to Romans 12, verses 18 – 20 – I have given this heading, "Let God deal with our enemies". Anyone living out a truly Christian life will encounter opposition and criticism, and how we deal with those things reveals a great deal about our state of mind and our spirit. And, I would just draw your attention to some of the Psalms which are sometimes referred to as the imprecatory Psalms. You have an example in Psalm 109 verses 6 – 15 – Psalms where David especially seeks that God would deal harshly with his enemies. Now this is a very difficult subject, but I think the fundamental teaching is that we should not pursue vengeance ourselves but leave it to God. David's concern, if you study that Psalm 109, seems very much to be to uphold God's teaching and to defend His honour, it is not about David getting even with his enemies. That is so often our spirit, isn't it? The vengeance that David seeks is not to magnify himself, but to magnify the perfection of God's law and the awfulness of breaking it. Now we have almost a summary in verse 21 – evil and good. Peter's first epistle (chapter 3 verse 13), 'Who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good'. Oh to follow the good pathway. Where does that good pathway lead? Well, ultimately disciples are following their Lord to heaven. In the book of Revelation chapter 14 and verse 4 we read a description of those found in heaven, 'These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth'. Well really you could say it is a definition of a good disciple. They follow the Lamb, they follow the Lord Jesus Christ whithersoever, again a big word, all encompassing, whithersoever he goeth. This means not just physical locations and situations, but all His teaching and all His laws, his whole manner of life as they are set out in the Bible. So I ask again, Are we true disciples of our Lord?

Now I'd like finally just to illustrate this with a practical example of how a loving spirit should be manifest in the Christian life. I've headed this, "Dealing with others with whom we disagree". How should we deal with others with whom we disagree or who have different attitudes? A few years ago

in my work, I came across this following quotation, 'People may not remember exactly what you did or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel'. I'll say that again, 'People may not remember exactly what you did or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel'. And I think that's very true. If we deal harshly or unfairly with other people and we leave them feeling bruised or knocked back, that's what will be their lasting impression of us, no matter what we may actually have done or said, that feeling will remain. Bear that in mind at all times, much harm and upset has been caused by wrong handling of disagreements, and bitterness may last for years as a result. And of course sadly as well, we may often give a wrong view of Christianity to other people, by our imperfect way of handling those things. We need to be aware of the danger of hypocrisy in ourselves, how we need to consider whatever the matter is, whatever the substance of the disagreement, from the perspective of the Bible and its teachings. That's always relevant. I know there is a fashion, if you like, these days to say that the Bible is out of date, or it doesn't address our current social situations. Well it does, the same basic truths of God never alter and it's all still relevant to our circumstances. So again, think about that word in Proverbs, 'He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good'. Pray for wisdom. Again, read Romans chapter 14 before doing anything. This is critical to adopting a balanced approach, read it with much prayer. You can read that chapter, and you can say, Oh well that's fine it arms me with everything I wanted to know. That reinforces that I am right. Read it much more carefully, read it with an open mind, read it prayerfully, committing it to God. It may not be you that is right, or there may be more than one right way of proceeding.

Now it may be wise of course to speak to others, and we need to be careful there. It is not about telling tales or tittle tattle, but sometimes to seek advice from someone else is helpful. But I would stress this, I hope it doesn't really need stressing, but often it does, the word of God must always be paramount. That really must be the basis of how we handle it. In that chapter that I have already commended to you, Ephesians 4, we read this, 'walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.' And later in that chapter, 'speaking the truth in love'. Now if the disagreement has led to us being wronged in some way, how important it is to show a loving, forgiving spirit where there is evidence of repentance from the other person. Now that may be in this sense, a sincere apology that has been given. Jesus said (in Luke 17 v 3 – 4) 'take heed to yourselves, if thy brother trespass against thee rebuke him and if he repent forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him.' It's very simple isn't it? Notice that there are no other caveats or conditions. It simply says, 'If he is truly repentant, forgive him'. Another challenge to our natural spirit, again from Ephesians 4 v 32, 'be ye kind one to another, tender hearted (loving), forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.' That word 'as', means in like manner. How does God forgive His people? Is it grudgingly? Is it, as you might say, at the last moment? Is it only when they have been made to suffer for a while? Well, not at all, is it? Ah, that's sometimes how we forgive people, isn't it? But 'as God has forgiven you'. It means freely, swiftly upon repentance of the other party, wholly, above all out of love. That is how we should forgive others.

Now just in conclusion. In this address, I have tried to set out first, what is the guiding principle of the Christian life – namely love. Second, we have shown how the Christian life is one of discipleship and following our Lord in His teaching and personal example. And finally, we have considered how these truths should influence our behaviour, in practical everyday matters, such as dealing with other people with whom we disagree. Now one of the great concerns I have, in giving an address such as this one, is that we lay ourselves open to the charge of inconsistency or even hypocrisy:

“You say all the right things, but in your own life you don’t do what you tell others to do”. Well, one can only say yes, that is sadly often true. But if these principles that I have set out to you are based upon the scriptures, and I believe that we have demonstrated that they are, then it sets out how we all should behave. My failings don’t justify yours. We have David’s very sad example left on record, when he fell away from the path of righteousness and what terrible consequences there were. That’s an example for us to beware of, isn’t it? Not an example to copy. We can’t say “Well David did that and he was a child of God, and therefore it’s alright for us to do the same”. We know that would be nonsense. It’s a warning to us. We have the less excuse because his faults are there recorded for us to learn from. So how we must each pray for more grace, more faith in the pathway. A pathway that if followed in sincerity and truth will lead us to our Lord in heaven above.