



8. A Passion for Loving (1 Cor 13)

You will recall that over recent weeks we have been doing a series called Heart of Fellowship. It follows our series heart of worship where we discovered a little more of what worship was all about. Worship in itself is an exploration of our fellowship with God and we moved on to the next stage where we considered our relationship to those God has placed us with in His family, particularly in His local family group here in Swaffham.

This week we are coming full circle in our series as we reach the last part of 1 Corinthians when Paul gets to the bottom line of what our relationships should be with one another. Over the weeks we have found that we have all been immersed by one Spirit into one body. If you are a Christian this morning, you have been integrated into Christ's body. We are all a part of one another in Christ so whether we like the word or concept of unity, we have been made part of the Church whether we like it or not.

But we are also diverse too. God has made us different so that we can function together in His church as part of His body. We found out last time that gifts are given us according to God's grace - not because we may be superior or special - but according to Him. But in Corinth were people who thought they were better than others because they had certain gifts.

They are not unique. There have been many times over the past 2000 years where sign gifts have become evident in the life of the church and they have enriched its ministry. But also characteristic within such situations has been the Corinthian sin. Do we never learn?

They were a church moulded in the superiority of people who had an overdeveloped sense of their own importance. The people had made the possession of the gift more important than its purpose and were using the gifts to build up their sense of importance, to build up their ability to humiliate people, to build up their ability to manipulate people.

Their practices were self-indulgent clap-trap. And despite this being written 2000 years ago, you'll still find people who misuse that which has been given them by the grace of God. And it is to the detriment of His church wherever it happens. It's not just the misuse of tongues, prophecy or words of knowledge, but leadership authority, teaching and whatever else.

And that's precisely what Paul tells us in this chapter. We might have all these fabulous God-given abilities, but have the wrong attitude about what we have them for and how we use them, then quite frankly we are a waste of space.

That brings us back to the start of the series. Right in the first session I linked this with a previous series on 1 John and we saw the way in which we were called to love one another. Our love for one another reflected our devotion to God. If we say how much we love Jesus and don't love our brother - then it shows we are nothing but a big fat liar. That's a bit strong? That's the force it comes across in John's gospel and first letter. This takes us right to the heart of fellowship.

And here we come up with the same in this important chapter of scripture. What does it tell us?

- Love should be the controlling principle of our lives and actions
- Love is about relationships
- Love never fails - so invest in it.

This is one of the most memorable passages in scripture and it brings us to the heart of fellowship. What should control our relationships with one another is love. The chapter uses that word for love that is most used in the NT. It was a word for love that Christians specifically used against the other Greek words for love - agape.

It's always been a problem translating this word into English because love doesn't adequately convey its meaning. The translators of the Authorised (King James) Version tried here (but nowhere else to use the word "charity". But this doesn't convey the idea at all - it's the wrong word completely..

As I've repeated many times agape is a self surrendering love where I put my needs before the needs of others - the best example being the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the heart of fellowship!

In fact, as we shall see in a moment, this passage helps us to understand what agape really means in our lives and our relationships with one another and the world. Let's look at the three attributes of agape that Paul uses here.

● Love should be the controlling principle of our lives and actions

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

So here were these people in Corinth that believed they were superior because they had the sign gifts - tongues, words of knowledge, prophecy. As we saw previously, they believed that somehow God had blessed them because of their "faith" - their spiritual superiority.

Paul just looks at that and says - without love you clank around like an empty tin can!. The church of God is full of gongs and symbols - and empty tin cans! What Paul is opening us to the possibility of here is that we might by God's grace be blessed by remarkable spiritual gifts, but without love being what controls our dealings with God and man, it's just a waste of time. And worse still, we may be without love even if we exercise gifts and do noble things because we are doing it all for the wrong motives.

One of the saddest things I have observed over the years is that it does not matter what the church type is - Baptist, Brethren, Anglican or what the tradition is - charismatic, non-charismatic and the like, there have been people who have shown the love of Christ in their words and their deeds - selfless, humble. And they weren't necessarily the top-notch Bible preachers, or people that had remarkable gifts of prophecy or tongues or even massive endeavours of faith. They were and are just people who exude Christ and you know they walk close with Him. In the end, our walk of obedience to Christ is what counts before God, not all our personal feats before the household of faith. And what is that command - love one another as I have loved you!

Who do we think we are before God this morning? Whether we think we are a "spiritual great" or someone who feels inadequate in our faith, we are all called to the

most excellent way - to love. It's not just encouraged as Paul encourages too, we are called to it as we explore other scriptures.

God does not want us to crash around, but to love one another.

Love is about relationships

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails.

And what does love entail. I've often described agape as self-sacrificing love, best shown by the way the Lord Jesus Christ gave Himself for us. These verses I say very precisely what a life of love is all about. It's all characteristics. Do you want to know what God wants you to be like. The try this exercise. Substitute your name for the word love in these verses.

And that's where it starts to hurt. That's what we should be. Virtually everything there looks outwards from me. Do we want to see a real revolution in this church? Do we want to see revival? Do we want to see this fellowship grow and prosper in Christ? Then it will start when a revolution of love occurs in our hearts and we all become like what we have just read. You see, we all have different gifts, but in unity we are all called to the most excellent way.

Love never fails - so invest in it.

But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Why all seek love anyway. Quite simple really, because it lasts! Why are there prophecies and tongues and words of knowledge? It's because right now we only perceive the things of God in part. Everything is like it is in a mirror; just a poor reflection. But one day we will see and know everything. These sign gifts were given that we are able to see through a glass darkly as the Authorised has it. They are given so that God can communicate His will. One day that won't be necessary as we'll be in His presence and everything will be clear.

All the gifts we read about in chapter 12 will be gone. But the more excellent way will still be there because love never ends. Paul doesn't say why here but 1 John helps us - because God is love. Look at that final sentence in chapter 13:

We are called to be like Christ - we are called to love. *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.* Why these three? Because when we strip anything else away, the only things that will last eternally are these. The rest will pass away. All our churches, languages, things we relied upon, our Bibles, the Baptists, denominations, traditions, spiritual - they will all be gone because we won't need them because we will be in the presence of God. What's left - faith, hope, love. We enter into eternal life through faith to receive an eternal hope but also an eternal nature - love. The greatest of these is love because throughout eternity we will be in fellowship with one another.

Eternity starts from the point when you first exercised your faith and had that hope. We are called to love because that is the nature of our relationship with one another and with a holy God not just now, but it's practice for eternity?

And that's our challenge this morning. How loving are we. We have the criteria - we've read it together. As you've looked at it this morning maybe God has been challenging you.

Maybe there are relationships that need mending. Maybe you have issues in your life - unforgiveness, resentment, hatred, broken relationships, bad attitudes, backbiting or whatever and you know you need to deal with them and live a life of love.

Let's come before be for Him afresh this morning.

Prayer of confession

"Spirit of the Living God (Fill me anew)"



***Preached by Mark Reid, Swaffham Baptist Church, 14/3/04.
Scripture Quotes NIV
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