

it must be love



love, love

1 Corinthians 13

TITLE

MADNESS – IT MUST BE LOVE

Love. You've all heard plenty of sermons on it – a few of them from me. I'm sure many of us know that the English word for love covers many ideas and sentiments, whereas in Greek there are a number of words for love.

PICS

In English love can be a trivial word as indicated in these photos. It can be an intense word as well when referring to romance and sexual relationships.

VERSE

Love is central to who we are as God's people. But it is none of the above. Here's one important definition.

John said *"This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven."* (1 John 4:10). It's not a definition that ordinary people would recognise. We'll come back to it in a moment.

In the last month or two I have been exploring how God has brought us into fellowship with one another in Christ. Why? Because God loved us so much that He sent His Son to die for us. When we accepted Jesus, we were made part of something – the body of Christ – the church. Church is not an optional extra for Christians. It's God-appointed, Christ-headed and Spirit-empowered. God has made us part of something. If He's made it then it's good. If church is bad in any way it's because we're messing up His handiwork!

He's made us one in Christ and we should have a unity of mind and thought. He's placed us in the body to play our part. Church is strong because it's diverse – but we can use diversity against one another and when that happened it's very destructive.

WELCOME TO CORINTH CHURCH

The church at Corinth was facing strife because, as we found last week, that they didn't respect one another. This was happening over a range of issues. One of the worse forms of destruction was how people used the 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. In Corinth, as in many places today, the Holy Spirit gives some pretty exciting gifts to enable the church to worship and serve. They are given to people and are a result of God's grace. They are not given on merit or when someone meets a certain standard. Gifts are for all – you only have to be ready and willing to allow the Spirit to do His work in you.

Unfortunately the church at Corinth were moulded in the superiority of people who had an overdeveloped sense of their own importance. So some with certain spectacular Spirit-given gifts such as tongues, prophecy, healing, miracles and the like, thought that as these gifts were patently supernatural and spectacular looking, that it made them spiritually superior in some way. That just wasn't true. Those with gifts of helping and administration were just as important and just as needed by the Spirit in God's work. People had made the possession of a 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.

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 in exactly the same way!. 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 chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians. 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. So Paul urges us to focus on a greater way – the greatest thing coming from God – love. And here we come up with this important chapter of scripture. What does it tell us?

SLIDE

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. Many people use it as a kind of ode to love. It's often read in marriage services. But it has nothing to do with marriage and romance as such. It is about the foundation of all relationships in the kingdom of God – the church of Jesus Christ. It's what characterises God Himself and what should characterise all his people. Chapter 13 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..

DEFINITION

As I've repeated many times agape is a self surrendering love where I put the needs of others (and obedience to God) before my own, despite the cost - the best example being the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the heart of His fellowship with us and therefore ours with Him and ours with one another!

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.

1. Love should be the controlling principle of our lives and actions

1 I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. 2 I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains--but if I have no love, I am nothing. 3 I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned --but if I have no love, this does me no good.

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. And they used it to lord it over others. We explored last time how there were those that did not respect others because they are weak.

But gifts without love? Paul just looks at that and says - without love you clank around like an empty tin can!. The church of God down 2000 years has had plenty 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 people, gifts a waste of time. And worse still, we may be without love even if we exercise gifts or just do what seem to everyone to be 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. God does not want us to crash around, but to love one another.

2. Love is about relationships

4 Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; 5 love is not ill-mannered or selfish or

irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; 6 love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. 7 Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail. 8. Love is eternal (or 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 as we read earlier. 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.

3. Love never fails - so invest in it.

There are inspired messages (prophecy), but they are temporary; there are gifts of speaking in strange tongues, but they will cease; there is knowledge, but it will pass. 9 For our gifts of knowledge and of inspired messages are only partial; 10 but when what is perfect comes, then what is partial will disappear.

11 When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now that I am an adult, I have no more use for childish ways. 12 What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete--as complete as God's knowledge of me. 13 Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and 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 cheap 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 and we'll speak directly to Him.

Let's look at the last verse in chapter 13.

VERSE

13 Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and 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