

The Way of Love
Mark Heath, 4th Feb 2005
1 Cor 13:1-13

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

¹³So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

This passage is one of the most famous in the whole Bible, and certainly amongst the most frequently preached on. This is in no small part due to the frequency about which it comes up at weddings, particularly verses 4-6. But this passage is not about romantic love, but the type of love that should exist between Christians in the church. And although this chapter might at first glance appear as an excursus from Paul's discussion in chapters 12 and 14 on spiritual gifts, in fact the context is never left.

Jesus identified love for God as the greatest command, and love for your neighbour as the second greatest (Matt 6:36-40). The apostle John repeatedly stressed the importance of loving one another (e.g. 1 John 4:7,8). And here, in no uncertain terms, Paul puts it right at the top of the priorities for a Christian. So if love is indeed the greatest command then it is vital that we know what it means. It deserves our regular attention, and if that means hearing things we have heard before then so be it. Until we can claim that we love God with *all* our heart, soul, mind and strength and that we love our neighbour *as ourselves*, then this is a lesson we must keep coming back to.

But why has Paul inserted a discussion of love in the middle of a section of teaching on spiritual gifts? It is not because he thinks of love as just one amongst the many varied gifts – far from it. Love is a way of life (1 Cor 12:31; 14:1). Paul was about to tell the Corinthians that they should “eagerly desire” the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 14:1) but they needed to get it into perspective. No gift, however great, has any significance if it is not accompanied by love.

Love and Spiritual Gifts v1-3

In the opening verses Paul underscores the surpassing value of love as compared to spiritual gifts. First, *love is better than tongues and preaching*. Whether speaking in human languages or in angel languages, it is meaningless noise if there is not love. Second, *love is better than prophecy and discernment*. Whatever spiritual gift is your special thing, it is pointless if you don't have love. Also, *love is better than faith and power*. The most spectacular of spiritual gifts will certainly impress the crowds, but

God is not impressed if there is no love. Finally, *love is better than generosity and sacrifice*. It is even possible for these apparently loving actions to be performed with only selfish motives in mind, and if that is the case, then they are utterly valueless. So love greater than not just the gifts but anything that might be held up as a sign of spirituality.

So if you desire anything for your life, desire that you are a loving person. All other dreams to be used by God and for God should be secondary in comparison with your intention to love. We are to love because God is love, and we are to be like him. Love is so fundamental that our whole Christianity can be evaluated on the simple question of whether we show love or not.

What is Love v4-7

This section is not just a beautiful description of love, but a practical one. We all know that love is not merely a feeling, but a way of life, expressed in self-giving on behalf of others. John is painfully aware that we can claim to love, without backing it up in action. “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

So Paul defines love not philosophically but in terms of attitudes and actions. More could probably be said, but he chooses a number of aspects that are particularly relevant to the Corinthians. As we consider a passage like this we should pray that the Holy Spirit speaks to us and shows us which of these descriptions of love we are in most need of hearing.

First, there are some examples of *what love is*. It is patient and kind. Of course it is, because that is exactly what God is like. Patience is carrying on loving someone when their behaviour tempts us to stop, while kindness is showing we love someone by practically meeting their needs.

Second, there are some examples of *what love is not*. If we recognise attitudes of arrogance, rudeness, irritability or resentment, then they are sure signs that we are lacking in love. Arrogant people brag about their gifting and rude people put down other people's gifting. Irritable people upset others by cruel remarks that were hardly deserved, while resentful people back away from close relationships without ever telling the other person what they had done to offend.

Third, there are examples of *what love does*. Love cannot merely be defined in terms of attitudes, but must include action. It rejoices with truth, delighting with people whenever something good happens in their lives. It bears all things and endures all things, keeping going even in the most adverse circumstances. Love believes all things and hopes all things, not meaning that we always believe people to be telling the truth, but that we never give up on people or write them off as lost causes.

Finally, there are examples of *what love does not do*. Always insisting that we get our own way shows that we are selfish, not loving. Of course Christians would never want to rejoice at wrongdoing, but when they gleefully pass on gossip about someone's sin, this is exactly what they are doing.

It has been pointed out that if you replace the word “love” in these verses with “Jesus”, you get an accurate description of his character. But as Gordon Fee suggests, perhaps it would be more beneficial to put your own name in, read it out, and see how accurate a description it is – it may be quite a sobering experience.

Learning to love as God requires is not a personal improvement project that we can work on for a few months. It is a lifetime quest that requires daily commitment. And ultimately it is only God himself who can empower us to love in this way. So we should use this description of love to inform our praying. This involves spending some time thinking about practical ways in which we can show love to our friends, family, colleagues and even our enemies (which includes those people we find 'difficult').

Everlasting Love v8-13

In this section, we are reminded that tongues and prophecies serve a purpose that will one day become obsolete. There will be no need for supernatural revelation in heaven, when we can speak to God face to face. Even faith and hope will not have the same meaning in eternity, but love will go on.

It may have been that the Corinthians thought of themselves as partaking in some kind of heavenly or angelic realm by their tongues speaking. But they couldn't have been more wrong. Love is what has always been going on in heaven, and always will, because God is love. Prophecy and tongues have only existed for a short time, and will soon cease forever. These gifts serve as reminders that we are still living in the “not yet”, and are only tasting a small amount of what is in the “age to come”.

At different times in church history it has been right and appropriate for people to stress the importance of doctrines and practices that had been lost or corrupted. This includes of course, the very topics that Paul has been discussing: spiritual gifts, tongues and prophecies, diversity and order. But they must never be allowed to become the chief focus, or in any way detract from the most important commands: to love God and love our neighbour.

Conclusion

The trouble with love is that it is not controversial enough. No one disagrees that we ought to be more loving, nor is there much argument about what real love is like. So the temptation is to focus our thoughts on the more tricky issues, the ones on which we can have a good debate. But if love is indeed the greatest command, then to fail to love would be the greatest sin. Jesus expected our love for one another to be the defining mark of our Christian community, that would make the world take notice (John 13:35).

Every Christian who has read their Bible knows how what we *believe* is stressed. But you can't fail to notice that what we believe is supposed to be seen in how we *behave*. For James (James 2:17), John (1 John 2:9), and Paul (1 Cor 13:2), the claim to have faith can only be proven by corresponding behaviour. It is essential therefore, having been informed as to what true love is, that we demonstrate it in our lives. A passionate love for God expressed in worship and obedience, and a deep love for one another, expressed in encouraging words and practical service. Because if we don't love, we have no right whatsoever to claim that we are even Christians (1 John 3:14,15).