

The Answer is Love!

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Is anyone getting married this morning? Anyone? Cos this is a wedding sermon passage isn't it? It says such beautiful things about love. And weddings are a celebration of love so it's perfect right? The only thing is, I think this is the most famous passage used at weddings that has nothing to do with getting married.

So what is it about? And how can a passage about love be a rebuke? And what does love have to do with speaking in tongues?

Well, before we get to all of that we need to really quickly catch up on where we are up to in the first letter to the Corinthians.

This is one of the two letters we have written by Paul, the apostle or authorised spokesman of God, to the church in Corinth. Paul came and preached the gospel in that city, saw people converted, started a church and then continued on to preach the gospel elsewhere. Others had come in to pastor the church, but Paul maintains a link to the church he founded and continues to care for them greatly.

This letter is a response to a letter that Paul had received from the church and after a brief but important greeting and thanksgiving, Paul launches in to responding not to the letter they had sent but to other reports that he had heard about them. For the first 6 chapters he covers divisions within the church and other issues. It's only at chapter 7 that he addresses some of the issues that the Corinthians had written to him about. Paul saw fit to address concerns from marriage and sex to food sacrifices to how to look after one another when we gather to eat.

Our text today is right in the middle of a three chapter long unit of thought about 'what does it mean to be spiritual?' In the chapter before this, Paul speaks about the blessing of different gifts within the church and how important every member is to the church. Afterwards he'll speak about how important it is that what churches do and say is clear and that our gatherings must be orderly.

Now that was only a short overview. But I thought it worthwhile to set the context for us because there is a sense that if the Corinthians had got what Paul is trying to teach them in chapter 13 then most of the 12 chapters that came before it wouldn't have been needed.

Let me show you what I mean.

Verse 1-3 The Necessity of Love

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith, so as to remove mountains,

but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Three times in three sentences the same phrase rings out. Now it's worth pointing this out because repetition in the Bible is important. I'll say it again. Repetition in the Bible is important. One more time...

Love is what Paul is driving at here. We can all think of times when someone can *do* the right thing but from the wrong motives and that's what Paul is going after here.

And the examples that he gives are not chosen at random. First he talks about speaking in tongues, or probably better, languages. This was an issue that Paul addressed in the last chapter. The Corinthians thought they were more spiritual than others because of this gift. Paul simply tells them that without love, it's as 'bout as useful as noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Which by the way isn't all that useful and frankly pretty annoying. He speaks of prophetic powers, understanding and knowledge and even faith – all good things – but without love? I am nothing. Then he gets more personal. If I give away all my possessions and hand over my body, but I do not have love, I gain nothing.

Now, all of these things are good things. But love is essential to them all. Without love they are useless. The Corinthians thought they were the best most, spiritual Christians around. They had gifts, they were impressive people but Paul had to come and tell them: You are missing love. You are doing plenty but you don't understand love.

It begs the question for us this morning. Are we loving? If people were to look at us as a church, as a gathering of God's people, would the first thing that came to their mind be “Those people love each other and they are ready to love anyone who comes through the doors.”? (I really hope it is).

And if we're going to love, we need to know what it is to love people. And thankfully Paul tells us from verse 4.

“Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful (Or better yet: does count wrongdoing rather than resentful);
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

This is the *character* of love.

This is the non-negotiable of Christian behaviour. This is the sort of list that we would do well to take out again when we get home and pray through and reflect honestly on whether our lives look like this. Pete last week told us of a friend of his that decided to spend some time working through the fruit of the spirit in

Galatians 5 as she worked on her godliness. This is a list like that. So let's take a closer look.

Firstly, love is patient, love is kind. These seem to be the necessary passive and active responses towards others. Patient or long-suffering is passive. The idea is of bearing with or showing long forbearance towards people. And then there is the kindness. This is a goodness on someone's behalf. This is *doing* something for someone else's benefit.

And our God is like this, is he not? On the one hand, he shows patience towards us in holding back his wrath towards our rebellion; and on the other hand he is kind to us, seeking our good in coming to us and rescuing us from our state.

Paul then turns to show what loves *doesn't* look like. And again the list is not random. Most of them are direct rebukes to the Corinthian church.

Love does not envy. Back in chapter 3 the same word is used to describe the rivalries that are seen in their divisions over their teachers. But love doesn't envy, it's not jealous. It doesn't 'help' people to curry favour but rather seeks the opposite asking 'how can I best serve these for whom Christ died'?

Love is not boastful. Paul's adversaries, the ones stirring up so much disharmony and leading the church down the wrong paths were arrogant and boastful. Over and against Paul the Corinthians thought they had 'wisdom' that Paul refutes in Ch 3 and knowledge that Paul deals with in Chapter 8. Because they had these things they boasted in these gifts. You can't boast and love at the same time.

Love is not proud.

The word Paul uses here is used 6 times to describe the Corinthians themselves in this letter and only one other time in the whole New Testament. It means 'puffed up'. The Corinthians were proud, they were arrogant. They thought of themselves as superior to others. They thought they were more spiritual. But this is not loving. To love would be to think of yourself less and others of great importance than yourself.

Love is not rude.

The word is something more like 'shameful' or 'disgraceful'. The Corinthians brought shame on themselves in all sorts of ways from how they attired themselves to how they treated one another when they gathered to eat. The Christian cares for others too much to act in such an 'unseemly' manner.

Love does not insist on its own way.

This brings to mind the incident where these Christians were causing one another to stumble over what they ate or didn't eat. It's not loving to be so self-involved that you are trampling on others while looking after yourself. Our modern notion of 'finding oneself', a notion so vague that you can mean whatever you want by it, is a perfect example of this. Spending time to 'find

yourself by ignoring others and figuring out what you want is just selfishness by another name. Love would see the other person as more important.

From here, Paul seems to move beyond issues in Corinth specifically.

Love is not irritable.

Some other translations have 'easily angered'. Having reflected on this list during this week as I've prepared to preach, this is the one I think I need to go away and pray for God's help to improve. I know that there are things that provoke me to anger that shouldn't. This is what I'll be thinking about this week. It's the opposite of the forbearance that we saw at the beginning of this list isn't it

These are the sorts of things that love is. But because this section is so poetic I think we can lose sight a bit of what we are being taught here.

Love is not an abstract quality. Love isn't even a motivation for behaviour, it is behaviour. It's *how* we are to act.

In fact to love *is* to act. (Repeat) And if we needed any reminder of that we need only think of our Lord who came and in the ultimate act of love gave his life for us. He loved. He took action. We are to do the same.

And the reason that we are to love is because love is permanent. It's eternal.

The Corinthians thought that prophesying was a sign that they were more spiritual than others. They thought that the fact they could speak in different tongues or languages made them superior and they thought that their knowledge set them apart. But Paul from verse 8 has to remind them that:

"Love never ends.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;

as for tongues, they will cease;

as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways."

You see the Corinthian church was enormously gifted. They prophesied, had knowledge and all the rest. They were content with themselves and how their church was going. They probably thought that their church was how church was *supposed to be*. This is how true spirituality looks like. Look at us, see how gifted we are.

Look at how well we are doing!

And yet, prophecies and knowledge will come to an end.

Tongues will cease. These are good things, but they are impermanent things.

They are temporary, they belong to this age. It's worth asking ourselves if we have fallen into this trap.

We mustn't delude ourselves into thinking that this is only a first century problem and we wouldn't be so foolish.
We are sinners just like them.
They were Christians just like us.

Do we here at St Mark's think we are better than other churches? Has pride, deadly pride, crept into our gathering? If we do, what is it that we think makes us superior?

Do we think we are better because of how we do church?
I reckon the choir is superb. I love hearing their voices together and I appreciate how they help serve the congregation but have we fallen into the trap of thinking of ourselves as a better church because we have them?

Do we think we're better because we have a children's worker?

Or do we think we are somehow more spiritual because of all the programmes we reach?

Friends, choirs will come to an end, children's workers will cease and our programmes will come to an end.

They are good things to have, and good things to do but if they are not done with love then they gain us nothing.

Love, on the other hand, love never ends. Love stretches beyond this life, whereas much of the good things we do will cease when this world ends. That's what Paul has been trying to say here.

'You're so focussed on these things that won't even last into eternity! You would be a far better church, you would be far more spiritual if you worked for what is eternal. Love people, as Christ loved.'

So then, to finish. How are we to love? Do we stop our programmes? Do we get rid of the choir? No, not necessarily. The problem is not in the things we do it's how we love people.

So, I'll ask again, how are we to love? We've seen today that love requires action and we've seen that love is eternal.

So to love means to take action that will last for eternity. (Repeat) Loving people is not just to care for their earthly needs but to preach the gospel to them. It's to share with them the life giving, eternity giving news that the Lord Jesus died and rose again to pay the debt we owe and there is nothing left to do but to put our trust in him and follow him home, because *that's* what will last to eternity.

We *should* care for people's earthly needs, just as prophesying and gaining godly wisdom are worthwhile things to do, but unless we love people enough to warn them of their true condition they gain nothing by our efforts.

We can and should feed people, and house them but if we never preach the gospel to them, then we *are... not... loving* them. We should be teaching both children and adults how to read and how to take care of themselves but if we withhold the word of life from them(?) we are as useful as a noisy gong.

We have only a short time here to serve the Lord. What will we do with it? Friends, do the work that lasts to eternity. Tell people of the wonderful Lord and God we have. Tell them of what he has done for you. And what he offers to them. Live the more excellent way:

Love.