

All You Need is Love – Part 8

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The giving and receiving of love lies at the very foundation of our lives and to become truly successful in life, we need to learn how to receive and to give love. We can pursue success and fulfilment in any other area of life - but if we miss out on being loved by God and others and returning that love to God and others, then we will have missed the whole reason for being here.

Today I want to draw your attention to that beautiful hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul's famous ode to love is well known and it's often read at weddings. Any passage on love is appropriate to read at a wedding - including this one. However, to see this passage only in that context is to miss the whole point which Paul wanted to make when he wrote these powerful words. If you read this whole letter to the Christians at Corinth, you will see Paul scolding these believers earlier because of their silly, air-head spiritual ways. In that context, what he then effectively says in chapter 13 is: *"You can look and sound spiritual and do all sorts of things in Jesus' name - but without love - it's all nothing!"*

So this beautiful passage was actually a stern correction to abuse and sinful behaviour in the Church and a strong reminder that love must lie at the heart of any God-honouring ministry or life. The presence or absence of love is the ultimate test of authenticity in the church. So if this passage is going to have any relevance for us, we need to hear it and experience it in its original context first.

The Corinthian believers had elevated one spiritual gift above the others. That gift was speaking in tongues and they had effectively made this one spiritual gift the mark of true spirituality and they were certainly not the last Christians to make that mistake. In doing this, they had neglected and even downplayed common decency, courtesy, servility and genuine, selfless love. These believers got the idea that if they had any kind of spiritual experience then it was good, and if it was weird and out of the ordinary – then better still! But they were way off the track here and Paul needed to warn them. He clearly says in a number of places in this letter to the Church that just being spiritual; just having a spiritual experience and even exercising a true spiritual gift is not necessarily a good thing. If that gift is not exercised in a way that is helpful to people, if it's not edifying to people, then we are not operating in love. Paul doesn't downplay the gifts, he simply stresses the need for love to always be the vehicle in which those gifts travel within the Body of Christ and into the community around us.

So the key to knowing how to act in a Church community is whether it helps people. Are people loved or encouraged or blessed or edified or built up as a result of that ministry? In Paul's mind, spirituality boils down to something very basic and it's something that we all need to understand, appreciate and be reminded of often. God's love must be the fuel in our tanks, the grease on our axles and the destination in our GPS. That is the essence of what Paul is saying in this very beautiful, but confronting chapter. Being religious or spiritual does not impress God. He doesn't care for organised religion. He doesn't care about the survival of a particular ministry. What God is really concerned about is that people are helped and *that* is love and that is the only business God is, in because God *is* love.

So when we exercise the gifts God has imparted to the Church in the context of love, when we channel them into helping people, then, and only then are they valid in a ministry context. 1 Corinthians 13 was written to correct and to pull the Corinthian Christians out of their spiritual silliness and immaturity where people were not being loved or helped or respected.

Therefore, today we must be reminded that 1 Corinthians 13 is more than a beautiful description of love – it's actually a confronting challenge, and if needed, a rebuke to us. It should force us to look at our behaviour and the exercising of our gifts, so we can ensure that the wonderful qualities of love, as given to us here by God, are manifested in the way we live and act inside and outside the Church. So let's just look at the first few verses of this reading:

"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing." (1 Cor.13:1-3)

Now Paul intentionally starts off here talking about tongues and prophecy because these were two of the gifts which were being abused in the Corinthian church. If we read on into chapter 14 of this letter he deals with this abuse in detail. But his point here is simple: if the way you operate as believers is not lovingly focused on those unbelievers whom you desire to see come into the community of faith, then you have missed the mark. Paul says that when unbelievers come into our gatherings and see and hear things they simply cannot understand or relate to in any way, then it will do them no good whatsoever - it will probably guarantee that you never see some of them again. Unless someone has been able to explain what is happening – and turn something which appears weird into something edifying for all, then they will not be helped by that. Therefore, Paul says, don't do it!

Now of course there will always be some things that need explanation and there will be those things which are spiritually discerned once those people are enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Generally speaking, however, the unbeliever should be able to get a grasp on what's happening fairly quickly in a way that makes sense and is a blessing to them and leads them towards God, rather than drive them away in confusion or fear.

That's one of the reasons why I try to preach as simply and as clearly as I can and I have received feedback from unbelievers to my online sermons over the years which is encouraging and continues to keep me as grounded as possible in the way I present the gospel. I hope I will always preach that way and I hope this Church will always minister that way. That doesn't mean God can't manifest His presence in ways that none of us understand - it just means that as far as it depends on us - we should ensure that there is a simple, clear proclamation of who we are and why we are here, both by what we say and what we do.

So it would seem that the Corinthians had lost sight of this a little. Paul doesn't criticise them for speaking in tongues. He doesn't infer that it wasn't a genuine spiritual gift. He simply says that they were exercising this gift in a way that God never intended and so it was not helpful and therefore not loving - and if it's not loving, then it amounts to nothing. We need to get the strength of this. Paul says that a genuine spiritual gift from God, if it's being exercised in a way that does not help anyone - if it's done without love - then it's absolutely worthless. That's a very strong, but really important statement. Love is always more important than religious activity. Love is always more important than abstract spirituality. People are more important than programs.

You can see this throughout the whole ministry of Jesus. He demonstrated this truth so often. Probably the most exquisite examples were when Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. Every time He healed someone on the Sabbath, the religious people were there and ready to tell Him, *"You can't do that, Jesus. That's not spiritual. That's not right. Haven't you read the Old Testament where it says not to work on the Sabbath?"* Well, of course Jesus knew the Old Testament better than any of these amateurs and He told them in word and in deed that people are more important than their skewed interpretation of the law.

Jesus always put people and their real needs ahead of spirituality or religious practices. So our spiritual activities might be good - they might even be supernatural in the sense that we normally use that word, but they all amount to nothing if people are not cared for if they are not served in some way, if they are not loved. Now Paul goes on to explain what this loving and self-giving and helpfulness looks like.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.” (1 Cor.13:4-8)

Notice that these statements are all relational in nature. Love serves the real needs of people. Now in contrast with the modern feeling of love which is that it's only a feeling, just an emotion, the New Testament wouldn't understand that concept of love. That's why for us today in our culture it's hard to read in the English translation the word 'love' and even begin to know what it means because our frame of reference for that word has shifted a long way from Paul's frame of reference. Love for us in our culture is often a warm mushy feeling we have. In this passage love is not only a feeling - it is also an act of our will - it's a verb – it's something that we do. People see our love in action, or not.

These Corinthians thought they were a cut above the others because they had some pretty flashy supernatural gifts in operation. But Paul cuts them down to size in verse 8 when he says,

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

They were boasting that they had it all and Paul is telling them they have nothing! This must have been quite a shock to these believers. Paul was pointing out the selfish attitudes of some people in this Church who were hell-bent on getting everything for themselves. Paul says love is patient and kind and you are not – and that effectively renders you a big spiritual zero. So you can see why I get a little uneasy reading this passage at wedding ceremonies, when I understand it's context. It's a hard word of rebuke and warning and a very necessary word today.

Now I could go through this love chapter word for word but I won't because it really is self-explanatory. Once we understand the central point that Paul is trying to make - the whole chapter rings with clarity and power. We are then forced to look in the mirror and ask some hard questions as we evaluate our lives, our ministries and the whole Church in this nation against this foundational benchmark of love. If we can look at these lofty ideals in 1 Corinthians 13 honestly and allow some heart-felt assessment and healthy repentance to flow - we can grow in a beautiful way. But better still, we also get to read this passage as a glorious promise of where we are headed.

The New Testament tells us that God *is* love and right here Paul gives us a long description of what love looks like and acts like, thereby giving us one of the most accurate and beautiful descriptions of the God we worship. So let me remind you about the God in Whose presence you gather today.

*“**God is patient, God is kind. God does not envy, God does not boast, God is not proud. God does not dishonour others, God is not self-seeking, God is not easily angered, God keeps no record of wrongs. God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. God always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. God never fails.**”*

Now can you see why God is the perfect person to live with? How would you like to be married to someone like that? Wouldn't that be great? Well that is who God is.

For many people in our world that comes as a surprise because we may have grown up with an understanding of God that is different to that. But regardless of how you *feel* about God; regardless of how unhappy you *think* He might be with you, I can assure you on the authority of Scripture that God is all of the above and more.

Wouldn't it be nice if you were married to someone who never remembered what you did wrong the day before? Think about that for a moment. Well the fact of the matter is, you *are* married to such a person. Every one of you who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ has entered into an intimate relationship - potentially more intimate than any marriage relationship - with God Himself - this God who keeps no record of wrongs.

Think how this Church would look if today, if right now we all stopped keeping a record of each other's wrongs. What would this Church look like if we all wiped the slate clean and looked at tomorrow, not yesterday, in all our relationships? My mind cannot conceive the glory of such a thing. But that is how God operates every day with each one of us and we miss it because we don't believe the truth of Who God is, or because we're too busy recording everybody else's wrongs or dwelling on our own failures, so we don't have time to bask in His accepting love. The word in the Greek behind that phrase in verse 5 is the same term used to refer to bookkeeping. When literally translated it means this: *Love does not compile statistics of wrong - love does not keep score.*

Love keeps no record of wrongs and God *is* love. How much clearer can we make it? In Hebrews 8:12 God says in the new covenant - in New Testament Christianity God says, *"I will remember their sins no more!"* You cannot get any clearer than that. When God says, "Forget it," that's exactly what He means! There *is* no permanent record to be used against us later and what that means is that since God doesn't hold it against us, we can off-load the guilt and the shame and start fresh every day. We don't need to live with the aggravation and pain and humiliation of the sins we have committed in the past - God keeps no record of our wrongs - so why should we? And the more we accept that truth and drink in God's unconditional love and complete forgiveness, the more we will become like God and the less likely we will be to keep a record of other people's wrongs. When we experience the reality of God's forgiveness and the clean slate He gives us every day - we will be better empowered to do the same to others.

Then, we will start to see the power of God's love explode again in the midst of congregations like ours and then, the gospel will actually be *good news* again and people will be drawn to it like they always have when our God, Who *is* love, is revealed to them free of all the religious nonsense which has camouflaged and redefined Him for generations. When that happens, then that powerful prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17 will have been answered, for it was Jesus Himself Who prayed to the Father and said, *"I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."* (John 17:26)

The only human being ever to walk this planet who truly loved people with the heart and love of God was Jesus Christ, and now, through the mystery of God's amazing grace, it is 'in Christ' we live and move and have our being. That is the only reason we can love anyone, because it is the love of Christ which constrains us, empowers us, renews us and propels us towards a lost and needy world, confident that love never fails, because God never fails.